OLAUDAH EQUIANO AND ROBERT WEDDERBURN; TWO AFRO-BRITISH RADICALS IN LONDON, 1780-1830

by

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A number of African and Afro-Caribbean writers and abolitionists in London during this period are known from their books and letters. Many of them have been virtually "invisible men" for two hundred years though the books by Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano, and Olaudah Equiano[1] have been re-issued, partly a consequence of the growing interest in African literature in English, of which they were the founders in the late 18th century, partly from a desire to provide new perspectives in African history which could both reinforce defenses against continuing racism and help provide a focus for pride in black achievement. As much as the desire to reassess the literary quality of these narratives, questions of race and history lie behind the remarkable advances in slave narrative studies amongst African-American scholars[2]: the literary and the politico-historical motives are inevitably bound together.

In London, several of its African and Caribbean residents who gained fame or notoriety, had connections with the British radical movements of the late Georgian period. In this essay I shall look at two of them, Equiano and Robert Wedderburn with particular reference to their use of irony or burlesque in confronting the establishment with aspects of its greed, cruelty and hypocrisy.

London public life during this period was punctuated by rebellious uprisings, and other manifestations of social discontent. A mob had stormed and burned Newgate Gaol in 1770, the mob took to the streets again in 1780, when the unpopular relaxation of laws restricting Roman Catholicism resulted in the Gordon Riots. The Navy rebelled in the Nore Mutiny of 1797, and the Cato Street Conspirators, (one of their leaders a Jamaican mulatto, James Davidson) planned to blow up the Cabinet in 1820. Add to this the loss of the American Revolutionary War in 1783, the implications of the French Revolution in 1789, the war with France which followed, the fears aroused by Napoleon, repressive measures by a British government whose agents saw the threat of sedition in the very existence of such men even as Wordsworth and Coleridge, let alone

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the fiery eccentric Blake. Iain McCalman summarises the atmosphere of the 1790's with reference to a pamphlet of 1800:

> . . . Reid asserted that the London democratic movement of the 1790's comprised three separate but related elements: the mainly artisan proponents of French-Jacobin republicanisms; overlapping groups of infidels, or political freethinkers, dedicated to moral and intellectual subversion; and an 'auxiliary' force of lower-class religious enthusiasts with a similar passion to overthrow the established order. All three types converged in popular debating clubs - some of an intellectual rationalist disposition, others of a more convivial type which met in alehouses to voice a melange of blasphemy, millenarianism and sedition, and to plot insurrection in secret. Reid wrote that incisive government action in the late 1790's had crushed this tavern political underworld, but warned that an 'incorrigible' remnant planned to regroup at the first opportunity[3].

A radical leader of the next generation, Francis Place, made a distinction in his autobiography between two types of radical, one "respectable", aspiring to polite social status, the other subversive, dissolute, or to use Place's word, "blackguard", to emerge in the early 1800's. Again I quote McCalman:

> Place believed that the majority of London's middling sort (or tradesmen) managed during the early years of the nineteenth century to throw off this essentially brutal and degrading culture in favour of a new humane and civilising code of respectability. Writing at the end of the 1820's, it appeared to him that popular manners and morals had undergone a revolution. Only the unskilled poor or professional criminal classes had clung to 'blackguard' norms and practices. Economic independence and the possession of a skilled status had formerly been enough to define an artisan as respectable, but in the 1820's he could only expect social respect if he also **behaved** respectably and acquired sober, self-improving (though non-deferential) values . . . The change was symbolised for Place by his attendance of a Jacobin reunion at the Crown and Anchor tavern on 5 November 1822. Here he met at least twenty former LCS (London Corresponding Society)[4] delegates who had

> once been journeymen or shopmen, but were 'now all in business, all flourishing men'. In addition to himself, he was referring to men like Thomas Hardy, John Richter and Alexander Galloway, who had managed to build up prosperous businesses in their respective areas of shoe making, engineering and sugar-refining . . . Hand in hand with their material advances, Place noted, went a new attachment to respectable values manifested in the cultivation of family-centred rational recreation and the provision of education for their children.

Many had adopted the moderate reformist and educational goals associated with Westminster radicalism after 1807. Place pointed by contrast to a residue of former Jacobins who had failed to improve themselves - morally, intellectually or materially - remaining fixed in the feckless, dissolute and criminal patterns of the past.[5]

It is significant that it was at the house of one of the prosperous radicals, Thomas Hardy the shoemaker, founder of the London Corresponding Society, that Equiano was lodging in 1792, when he wrote a letter[6] to a group of abolitionist clergy at Nottingham, announcing his marriage, with an amusing glimpse of his eager eye for commerce associated with good works.

> I now mean, as it seem pleasing to my Good God! - to leave London in about 8 or 10 days more, & take me a wife, (one Miss Cullen) of Soham in Cambridge shire, and when I have given her 8 or 10 Days Comfort I mean Directly to go to Scotland and sell my 5th editions . . .

adding that he is only in London, 'this wickd. town . . . to save if I can £232 I lent to a man who (is) now dying', indicating that having established himself in the respectable and skilled occupation of valet and hairdresser in the 1770's, and become a best-selling author in 1789, he was by 1792 already involved in the money lending business which, along with the success of his book, was to supply funds which would provide comfortably for his surviving daughter Joanna after his death.[7]

In fact Equiano had much in common with the ambitious self-made men noted by Place. His Igbo family background, of which he was deeply proud as the son of a titled man (Igbo **mgburichi**) led him to

a profound belief in his own destiny. His name, he tells his readers, meant "vicissitude, or fortune also, one favoured", and it was his commercial skills which enabled him as a slave to earn money by trade, and buy back his freedom. Not only was his book a best seller, he travelled the country making speeches against slavery both as a moral duty, and to augment sales. When he was in Edinburgh in 1792, he wrote a letter to the press praising the condemnation of slavery by the Scottish Assembly, and added at the bottom his address in High Street, "where copies of my narrative may be had"[8]. But he also had an engaging, characteristic candour about himself, and was capable of cool, often comic self-appraisal. He had saved up his money not only to buy his liberty, but a suit to wear at his freedom-parties:

> At the dances I gave, my Georgia superfine blue clothes made no indifferent appearance as I thought. Some of the sable females, who formerly stood aloof, now began to relax and appear less coy . . . (II.19).[9]

The phrase "as I thought" neatly marks the ironic eye directed towards a touch of the peacock in himself, and later, when he tells us that

> I found none among my acquaintance that kept wholly the ten commandments. So righteous was I in my own eyes, that I was convinced I excelled many of them on that point, by keeping eight out of ten, (II. 118).

in view of what he has told us about his friends "the sable females", the reader need not seek far to guess which was one of the two commandments he failed to keep. Again, one phrase, "So righteous was I in my own eyes" marks the ironic eye, and makes a joke of what might otherwise have been a piece of self satisfied piety.

At the same time he was a devoted Christian, though there is good reason for thinking that the roots of his Christianity lay as much in the Igbo values which he tells us "had been implanted in me with great care, and made an impression on my mind which time could not erase," (I.45-6) as in the Christian doctrines he had assimilated during his enslavement. Reading the Bible, he remarks that "I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my country written

almost exactly here; a circumstance which I believe tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory" (I.172). When he sees a preacher sweating, he cannot resist the impulse to make an ironic point against "Christian" ministers contrasting the sufferings of the slave with the soft life and lack of righteous energy or purpose of many of the clergy:

> When I got into church I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervour and earnestness, and sweating as much as I ever did while in slavery on Montserrat beach . . . I thought it strange I had never seen divines exert themselves in this manner before, and I was no longer at a loss to account for the thin congregations they preached to. (II.5-6).

Here in dealing ironically with more venial human error, he adopts an easy, jesting tone, but when it comes to deadly sins, to greed and cruelty, the irony can take on a bitterness akin to Swift's:

> I have often seen slaves, particularly those who were meagre in different islands, put into scales and weighed; and then sold from three pence to six pence or nine pence a pound. My master, however, whose humanity was shocked by this mode, used to sell such by the lump. (I.220).

As a radical, then, it is the greed, hypocrisy, insensitivity and cruelty of the rich and powerful that Equiano detested, but like the ambitious, upwardly mobile men noted by Place, he had no objection to the accumulation of wealth as long as this was accompanied by honest industry and social responsibility. Indeed, Chapter 5 of his autobiography is more an attack on the irresponsibility of the absentee slave estate owners and the cruelty of their overseers than it is on the institution of slavery itself.[10] Like many abolitionists of the late 18th century, he was no revolutionary, but a meliorist, putting his faith in reason and enlightened self-interest among the slave owners as likeliest to lead to benevolent treatment and ultimately to emancipation. We might also bear in mind that as a titled Igbo, Equiano's father was himself an owner of slaves, who were treated, Equiano is pleased to tell us, (one might suspect the human tendency to idealise memories of childhood here) virtually as members of the family:

> But how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us they do no more work than other members of the community, even their masters; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs, (except they were not allowed to eat with those who were free-born); and there was scarce any other difference between them, than a superior degree of importance which the head of the family possesses in our state and that authority which, as such, he exercises over every part of his household. Some of the slaves have even slaves under them as their own property, and for their own use. (I.26-7)

Sensing the moral ambivalence, perhaps, of his stance on the slave trade and aware of the gap between the Christian message and, not simply the world's but his own sharp eye for business, disarmingly, so all the more persuasively, he turns his satirical eye on himself. Many commentators have made reference to ironic strategies in Equiano[11], and his humour seems often designed to put his audience at ease in recognition of a shared fallen world of human error and weakness, though as I have said, when it comes to the cruel treatment of slaves, he is uncompromising in his indignation. A fine example of such a strategic self-presentation is an episode in which he acknowledges himself, too, as an eighteenth century practical man of finance in the tradition of Adam Smith, with a cool eye for a business opportunity. In it, those Georgia superfine blue clothes turn up again, and Equiano directs his perceptive gaze on the depth of his "respectable radical" acquisitive instincts and ambitions. In this way, Equiano is able entertainingly to deflate both commercialism, and the high "Christian" tone, without adopting any stern, finger-wagging, holier-than-thou moral stance, but by sharing the jest of human vanity with his reader. A dying passenger has promised to give all his money to Equiano's captain in return for care on shipboard:

> I used also to go with the Captain at his own desire to attend him (the dying passenger), especially when we saw there was no appearance of his recovery.

The Captain promises Equiano ten pounds on the man's death, and Equiano, saving every penny to purchase his freedom, as well as those superfine clothes with which he plans to impress the "sable

females" is delighted at the prospect of easy money, and "paid out above eight pounds for a suit of superfine clothes to dance with at my freedom." In due course, he tells the reader:

> away we both went and saw the man as dead as we could wish. The Captain said he would give him a grand burial in gratitude for the promised treasure.

but the man's trunks through which they search get smaller and smaller, yet contain nothing of value.

> At last when we came to the smallest, and had opened it, we saw it was full of papers, which we supposed to be notes; at the sight of which our hearts leapt for joy; and that instant the Captain, clapping his hands, cried out "Thank god, here it is." But when we took up the trunk and began to examine the supposed treasure and long looked-for bounty, (alas! alas! how uncertain and deceitful are all human affairs!) what had we found! While we thought we were embracing a substance we grasped an empty nothing. The whole amount that was in the nest of trunks amounted to one dollar and a half; and all that the man possessed would not pay for his coffin. Our sudden and exquisite joy was now succeeded by as sudden and exquisite pain: and my Captain and I exhibited for some time the most ridiculous figures - pictures of chagrin and disappointment! We went away greatly mortified, and left the deceased to do as well as he could for himself, as we had taken so good care of him for nothing. (II. 8-11)

It is this kind of ironic self-awareness which constitutes an important element of the book's truth. The rhetorical agonizings which parody the tones of pious lamentation here, juxtaposed with the explicit acknowledgement of the very human but far from pious, indeed predatory eagerness to lay hands on the money, establish an ironic contrast between Equiano the Christian sufferer on one hand, and on the other the hard-nosed moneylender he was to become in London in the 1790's, and the economic survivor he had learned to be during much of his life as a slave. Thus by the subtle process of self-mockery, he is able to direct his satire against the pious hypocrisies of his day, as well as the greed of bare commercial instinct unleavened by morality or charity. Quite deliberately, he

makes a **Holy Willie** of himself, in cool mockery of the less appealing aspects of the 'Christian' world.

Equiano's radicalism, then, was essentially respectable and moderate. He died in 1797, comfortably off and respected, 'a sober honest man' Granville Sharp told his niece.[12] In this he contrasts with another Afro-British author, Robert Wedderburn,[13] who began to be active in London at the end of the 18th century, but was by no means so respectable. Wedderburn was the son of a wealthy Scots-Jamaican planter and one of his slaves. His father never acknowledged him as his son, and in fact sold Robert's mother when she was five months pregnant with him. He sailed as a privateer, virtually a licenced pirate, and served in the Navy as main gunner and top station hand: according to McCalman it is possible that he was involved in the Nore Mutiny of 1797. After leaving the Navy, he earned a bare living in London as a jobbing tailor, but after undergoing religious and political enlightenment, he took out a license to preach as a Unitarian minister, and founded a Chapel in a hayloft in Hopkins Street. Later he was to establish a sect which he called with irony characteristic of his delight in burlesque, 'Christian Diabolists, or Devil Worshippers',[14] on the ground that since the will of God would not, indeed **could** not, be altered by prayer, it could only be useful in our fallen world to pray to the next most powerful agent, the Devil. The spirit of his Hopkins Street sermons, from what we hear of them, was that of burlesque. He would engage in farcical theological debates with a dwarf shoemaker, Samuel Waddington. Wedderburn, writes McCalman,

> the 'Black Prince', and the 'Black Dwarf' (as Waddington was nicknamed) functioned as a comic team convulsing their audiences with a type of mock worship . . . (which) could switch quickly from the burlesque to the melodramatic.[15]

His talent in fact was not so much literary as oral in the popular theatrical "trickster" tradition.

He was tried and jailed for blasphemy in 1820, and the last thing we know of him is that, at the age of sixty-eight, he was sentenced to two years hard labour for brawling in the street, outside a brothel of which he was the owner, which he claimed in an outrageous defence to be a refuge for destitute women. He also claimed in his defence

that a member of the very court which was trying him enjoyed the services of one of his resident women, called "Carroty Eliza". Wedderburn lived on the fringes of criminality, and troubled the authorities with his fiery preaching that it was the Christian duty of his flock to do all in their power to bring down a cruel, hypocritical and tyrannical establishment.

Wedderburn's writings have been even less visible than Equiano's, but happily, Iain McCalman is making them available once more, and not only that, confirming the importance of Wedderburn in the history of early 19th century English radicalism as a forerunner of the Chartists of the mid-century, and of the Labour movement of its close. He was a vigorous pamphleteer, author of such stirring radical titles as **The Axe Laid to the Root**, and **Cast-Iron Parsons** and in 1824 he published **The Horrors of Slavery**, a short autobiographical account of his slave mother and his African-born grandmother, a smuggler's agent by the name of Talkee Amy. As well as bitter denunciations of slavery and the slave-trade, it consists largely of diatribes against his half-brother, a 'respectable' citizen of London, and against his deeply detested father, the Scottish doctor turned planter and slave-owner, whose ill-treatment of his mother and grandmother is a major theme of Wedderburn's book:

> To this present hour, while I think of the treatment of my mother, my blood boils in my veins; and, had I not some connections for which I was bound to live, I should long ago have taken ample vengeance of my father. But it is as well as it is; and I will not leave the world without some testimony to the injustice and inhumanity of my father.
>
> From the time my mother became the property of my father, she assumed the direction and management of his house: for which no woman was better qualified. But her station there was very disgusting. My father's house was full of female slaves, all objects of his lusts; amongst whom he strutted like Solomon in his grand seraglio, or like a bantam cock upon his own dunghill. My good father's slaves did increase and multiply, like Jacob's kine: and he cultivated those talents well which God had granted so amply. My poor mother, from being the housekeeper, was the object of their envy, which was increased by her superiority of education over the common herd of female slaves.

> I never saw my dear father but once in the island of Jamaica, when I went with my grandmother to know if he meant to do anything for me, his son. (He) giving her some abusive language, my grandmother called him a mean Scotch rascal, thus to desert his own flesh and blood. This was the parental treatment I experienced from a Scotch West-India planter and slave-dealer.[16]

Wedderburn was no man for Christian forbearance - the charge of blasphemy laid against him was for calling Jesus "a bloody fool" for turning the other cheek. His fierce, often farcical ironies are more explicit than Equiano's, though like Equiano, he plays the fool as a strategy, designed all the more effectively to strike targets other than himself. He was assuredly a man of style and presence, and a master of the oral tradition. McCalman gives this account of his subversive political rhetoric and his blasphemous chapel:

> At the same time there was a lighter side to Hopkins Street blasphemy . . . debates functioned as a form of theatre intended to ridicule authority and entertain listeners. Part of the chapel's notoriety derived from the reputation of its leading speakers as peformers. Wedderburn believed that many had come to see and hear him because 'his name had gone abroad as a strange and curious sort of fellow'. He had, in Richard Carlile's words, 'developed a powerful eccentricity of manner'. His coarse and profane language: his colour and physique (often described as stout): and the spectacular events of his life - the slave background, rejection by his wealthy family, experiences as a fighting sailor, criminal pauper - were to say the least, arresting. He displayed the traits of many populist leaders - physical bulk, roguery, flamboyance, bombast, emotional religiosity and a thirst for martyrdom.[17]

If we compare the 'respectable' radicalism of Equiano with the spectacular swaggering bravado of Wedderburn, we can see, perhaps, why, for all Equiano's literary skill and persuasive oratory, as he travelled throughout the British Isles selling his book and speaking against the slave-trade, equally important for his success as a leader in the black community was his adoption of the radical respectability recognised by Francis Place, and the flexibility with which he adapted himself (whilst holding to the principles implanted in him during his

African childhood), to the often paradoxical, or plainly hypocritical commercial and religious values of English society, particularly in defence of the slave trade.

Wedderburn, on the other hand, displays a Dionysiac charisma which is wholly unlike the spirit of Equiano. Equiano is a reformer, Wedderburn a rebel, and rather than argue about preference for one or the other, we might look them with the eye of their contemporary Blake, who in many ways resembled Wedderburn, and allow that "Opposition is true friendship", not that Equiano and Wedderburn are exactly opposed. They are more like what Blake called **contraries**, supplementing each other in their differences, ("Without contraries is no progression")[18] Wedderburn's stance is more confrontational, showing nothing of Equiano's pragmatic adaptability. In view of the wide audience Equiano reached, as a result of the success of his book, and the prominence given to his letters to the press and elsewhere (one of them to Lord Hawkesbury was printed with the evidence of the 1789 Government Report on the Slave Trade)[19], Equiano must be recognised as an important voice guiding opinion towards legislation for the abolition of the slave-trade, the "principle instrument in bringing about the motion for the repeal of the slave-act" that the Northern Irish abolitionist, Thomas Digges, claimed him to be[20]. Wedderburn must also now be recognised as a significant contributor to British radicalism another of whose principal activists and spokesmen was a Black British voice, the Chartist, William Cuffay[21]. And as McCalman points out in the introduction to his new edition of Wedderburn's writings, by the time of his death in obscurity, there was to be a resurgence of mass radicalism through such organisations as the National Union of the Working Classes, and its militant successor the London Democratic Association led by Wedderburn's younger associates, and at the root of the growing working class political movement in Britain.

FOOTNOTES

1 Facsmilie editions of Sancho's **Letters** (1782), Cugoano's **Thoughts and Sentiments on . . . Slavery** (1787) and Equiano's **Interesting Narrative** (1789) were all reissued ed. Paul Edwards in Dawson's Colonial History Series 1968-9. For other Afro-British writers of the period, see Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen eds., **Black Writers in Britain**, 1760-1890, Edinburgh University Press, 1991.

2 See in particular Henry L. Gates and Charles T. Davis, eds., **The Slave's Narrative**, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

3 From W.H. Reid, **The Rise and Dissolution of Infidel Societies in this Metropolis**, London 1800, quoted by Iain McCalman, **Radical Underworld: Prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers in London**, 1795-1840, Cambridge U.P. 1988, 1. I wish to acknowledge my debt in this article to McCalman's brilliant research on Wedderburn: see also note 13 below.

4 The Corresponding Societies were clubs formed as radical units for working class self-improvement and political debate. See Henry Collins, "The London Corresponding Society" in John Saville ed., **Democracy and the Labour Movement**, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1954, 103-134. For Hardy, see his autobiography, **The Memoirs of Thomas Hardy**, London 1832. A manuscript letter of 1792 from Equiano to Hardy is reprinted in appendix A of Peter Fryer's **Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain**, London, Pluto Press, 1984, 403.

5 **Radical Underworld**, 28-9.

6 The letter is reprinted in Paul Edwards' introduction to the facsimile edition of Equiano's **Narrative**, xiv-xv. It is also in an appendix to Edwards ed., **Equiano's Travels**, (2nd edition), London, Heinemann 1969.

7 For Joanna's inheritance and Equiano's financial dealings in the last few years of his life, see Paul Edwards, "A Descriptive List of the Manuscripts in the Cambridgeshire Record Office relating to the Will of Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano)", in **Research in African Literatures**, 20.3. (Fall 1989), 473-480.

8 **Edinburgh Evening Courant**, Saturday May 6, 1792.

9 All quotations from Equiano are from the fascimile of the 1789 edition, **The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself,** ed. Paul Edwards, London, Dawson (Colonial History Series) 1969.

10 This is discussed in detail in a paper I shall give at a Conference on Africans in Britain, organised by Dr. David Killingray of Goldsmiths' College, London University, in December 1991. The influence of Equiano's father, and surrogate father figures in his life, is discussed in Paul Edwards, "'Master' and 'Father' in Equiano's **Interesting Narrative**" in **Slavery and Abolition**, 11.3. (September 1990), 227-271.

11 For example, see my paper on Equiano, Sancho and Cugoano in **The Slave's Narrative** (footnote 2 above); or Keith A. Sandiford, **Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing**, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses 1988.

12 Sharp to his niece Jemima, February 22, 1811. This letter was in the Granville Sharp Papers, now in the Public Record Office in Gloucester, but has been mislaid. Fortunately it had been transcribed by Christopher Fyfe of Edinburgh Univesity.

13 For Wedderburn's writings, see Iain McCalman ed., **The Horrors of Slavery and other writings by Robert Wedderburn**, Edinburgh University Press, 1991. McCalman discusses Wedderburn's place in English radicalism in his introduction, also extensively in **Radical Underworld.**

14 See McCalman, **Horrors of Slavery** etc., 153-4.

15 ibid., 24.

16 Robert Wedderburn, **The Horrors of Slavery**, London 1824, 10. The text printed in McCalman is not quite the same, 47.

17 **Radical Underworld**, 148-9.

18 Quotations are from Blake's **Marriage of Heaven and Hell.**

19 The text of this letter is reprinted in Edwards and Dabydeen, **Black Writers etc.**, 77-79.

20 Digges' letter is included by Equiano in the 1789 edition - see the facsimile edition, Appendix B, xii.

21 For an account of Cuffay, see Fryer, **Staying Power**, 237-245: see note 4.