

Robert Philipson, *The Identity Question: Blacks and Jews in Europe and America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), xxi, 254 pp.

From the Enlightenment radiated the ideals of rationalism and universalism. These were the standards that would erase the superstitions and prejudices that had poisoned human relations, the values that would eliminate the friction that had divided our species and caused it to suffer so dearly. In their struggle against obscurantism and tyranny, the philosophes could not conceive of diversity as a claim to be asserted, as a need to be cultivated and expressed; they tended to see difference as a source of trouble. Rights were universal and inalienable; laws emanated from nature and from nature's God. Then what happens to minorities under the sovereignty of reason? What happens when a historic entity like Jewry invokes the vision of a collective destiny of its own, when its religious traditions and its corporate memories diverge from the agenda of the party of humanity? And what happens when a race is reduced to mere property, degraded and stripped of human status, robbed of its past and its culture, and forced to abide in an alien land that denies the descendants of slaves the most elemental rights, so that a condition of equality with whites can scarcely be imagined? How such paradoxes were addressed even if they could not be resolved is the problem presented in Robert Philipson's learned and thoughtful disquisition. His book is a comparative study of diasporas — Jewish and black — through key autobiographies, by members of the minorities in question. And though the emphasis is on the United States, the ideological dilemma of *The Identity Question* is rooted in the cosmopolitan claims advanced in eighteenth-century France.

Philipson's method is to juxtapose these memoirs — or at least works so classified — to reveal how black and Jewish writers themselves presented their negotiations with the larger society, how they filtered their experiences through the double consciousness of feeling both a part of common humanity and yet apart from it. *The Identity Question* thus begins with *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in the year that the French Revolution erupted and as the U. S. Constitution

was being ratified. It is paired with Solomon Maimon's memoir, published in German five years later. Both Equiano and Maimon were exemplars of difference. But what, for example, was their nationality, in an era when the nation-state was emerging to challenge the very cosmopolitanism that the philosophes fancied themselves to embody? Equiano's *Narrative* (which may be fictionalized) has been classified under "African-American literature, Afro-British literature, and African literature," Philipson writes, just as Maimon has been considered "a Polish Jew, a Lithuanian Jew, and even a Russian Jew." (232n)

The mother tongue of one was Ibo, of the other Yiddish; and both writers were driven "to master the languages that would allow them to participate in the Enlightenment West." (41-42) Yet the success of their effort was hardly complete; and Philipson emphasizes the difficulty of these gifted memoirists in conveying the interior life of the Other in a white civilization, in a Christendom making a virtue of toleration yet assuming a superiority to everyone else. For all of their struggle to partake of the dominant society and spirit of western Europe, Equiano and Maimon hinted at a subjectivity that could not be communicated, at grievances and fears to which only they and blacks in captivity and Jews in the ghetto were privy. And even though the Enlightenment made revealed religion suspect, so that Maimon became a skeptic or a deist (who refused, for example, to say the blessing over wine), not even the appeal of reason could stifle the yearnings of the heart. Opposition to slavery emerged most forcefully among the dissenting sects like the Quakers, and Equiano's Protestantism was to be shared by countless slaves who dared to believe that the exodus from Egypt anticipated their own emancipation from bondage.

The failure of the Enlightenment to resolve its own inner tensions, or to accommodate itself satisfactorily to nationalist impulses, inspires the next section of *The Identity Question*, which shifts fully to American culture in the late nineteenth century and thereafter. In an epoch marked by racialist thinking, were Jews a separate race? Were they bound by something deeper than acceptance of the Pittsburgh Platform, something as primordial as the Celts or the Teutons or the Slavs could feel in themselves as well? In an era scarred by antisemitism and racism, how could Jews find relief except by bringing the two

millennia of exile to an end, and how could black Americans hope to achieve the security and dignity of full citizenship except by appealing to the common, normative standards of equal justice under law? These were the anxieties that dogged liberals forced to confront the challenge of Zionism, and the sorts of questions that animated the NAACP in its assault upon the discrimination that collided with the ideals of the Constitution.

As late as midcentury, the legatees of universalism lacked neither literary resources nor moral authority. Philipson pays special attention to Alfred Kazin (1915-1998) and Richard Wright (1908-1960). They were members of “the last generation of American writers who adhered, on a conscious level, to the ideology of ethnic transcendence.” (112) *A Walker in the City* (1951) recounts the passion to escape from the confines of the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, to make it all the way to Manhattan, and thus join a wider intellectual community, while looking back with tenderness at the cohesiveness and love attached to the family and neighborhood that ineluctably had to be left behind. *Black Boy* (1945) is a far more harrowing account of a Mississippian suspended between the terrors of a dysfunctional family and the menace posed to his very existence by the malice of white supremacy. In *On Native Grounds* (1942), his first book of literary history, Kazin wished to celebrate as well as diagnose the fiction of non-Jews whose villages and towns he could not have known directly. Wright propelled himself so furiously from the black South that he eventually expatriated himself to Paris and saw little in the subculture from which he had distanced himself to exalt or to explore. Yet their victory over provincialism was only partial. Haunted by the Holocaust, Kazin would invest characteristic passion in the appreciation of the key works of Jewish literature. In 2001 the National Yiddish Book Center named *A Walker in the City* one of the hundred canonical Jewish books. Far from disappearing from black American culture, Wright would be responsible for enlarging it, deepening it, playing an incalculable role in defining it — even if he did not live to see the success of the American political and legal system in eradicating the legacies of slavery and segregation.

Such are some of the positions taken and assessed in *The Identity Question*. It defies easy summation, however, since the author does not advance a thesis that is articulated, developed, and sustained. But as a close reader of particular texts, Philipson does offer convincing interpretations; the local perceptions that punctuate his book endow it with considerable interest. The author wisely makes no attempt to portray the social experiences of blacks and Jews as mirrors of each other, nor does he insist on literary parallels. Without forcing his texts into the same mold, he is adroit in finding points of comparison and certain structural and thematic similarities. This book is an instance of literary scholarship, historically informed, that cannot be enlisted in the political controversies swirling out of the relations between Jews and African Americans. But Philipson's work can be savored for its intelligence, its scrupulousness, and its exactitude.

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