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Tony C. Brown. *The Primitive, the Aesthetic, and the Savage: An Enlightenment Problematic*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. xxi + 278 pp. \$82.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-7562-3; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-7563-0.

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## The Impact of the Exotic

Tony Brown's preface challenges the explanatory power of historical interpretation. His preference for literary theory yields a work that will be heavy reading even for intellectual historians. Most prominent are the insights of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, though to be fair Brown has read deeply in the secondary historical literature on primitivism and the Enlightenment.

For the author, the Enlightenment problematic, typical of the eighteenth century, was the attempt to bridge the universal and timeless faculty of experiencing or imagining the beautiful or pleasurable with the experience of actual historical contact with non-European peoples or cultures. This bridging effort employed temporally situated savage or exotic figures to limit the aesthetic. The forceful impact of the New World (broadly defined) included contacts in the Americas, the South Pacific, and even the very non-savage world of China that upset European biblical chronology and complicated biblical narrative. According to the author, thinking the primitive, defined as the atemporal original human state, was uniquely difficult in the eighteenth century due to secularization. There could be no easy resort to a Divine Creator of the primitive. Unlike the possible nineteenth-century alternative, there could be no displacement of the category of the primitive by placing it within Hegelian historical stages of Spirit. The primitive could not be synonymous with the savage, since the primitive stood outside history. This was a kind of Rousseauist state of nature, while Europeans encountered existing, temporally

situated savage societies.

The author insists that contact with the non-European world upset the anthropological security of Europeans because it destabilized their relation to the world, although one might be tempted to argue it just gave them new pretexts for a superiority complex. An egregious example of refusing aesthetic relativism is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's denigration of the "Hottentot," who finds beauty in what is disgusting to Europeans. Savage populations that appeared lacking in writing, government, and social organization were instructive however for determination of primitive faculties.

The following chapters discuss four special cases of the aesthetic and its limits—Joseph Addison on Chinese landscape gardening, Immanuel Kant on facial tattooing of the Maori, Daniel Defoe on Robinson Crusoe's reaction to a footprint and to savages, and various authors on the burial mounds of Native Americans. For Addison the primary aesthetic experience was immediate and pre-cognitive, while the secondary experience was the property of the imagination. Novelty and variety were essential ingredients for the experience. For Addison, a Chinese garden, which concealed its own artistry and followed no strict rules, provided an exemplary exercise of aesthetic taste. The globalizing perspective thus introduced revealed the incompleteness of the European self and thus precipitated a crisis in European identity.

For Kant, the aesthetic was also primitive and uncon-

ditioned, but he distinguished the free beauty in wild nature from the conditioned beauty created for a purpose. The human face, Kant alleged, cannot be beautified with lines and curlicues because they would taint the purpose of the human being as the highest natural form. Hence there is a critical discussion of the Maori practice of facial tattooing. The markings cannot be detached from the face. Yet because it is a human face there are limits to making a pure aesthetic judgment of taste. In this way the represented practices of South Pacific peoples helped Kant develop the categories of his critique of judgment.

In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist felt a sentiment of overwhelming terror when encountering a mysterious lone footprint on his sandy beach. This anthropological insecurity made him build fortifications for defense. Yet when he discovered the remains of a cannibal feast, he experienced no heightened panic. Rather, he gave thanks to Providence for sparing him and for making him more exalted than brutish humans. Brown precedes this conclusion with a long discussion of the sublime. Especially relevant is Edmund Burke's sense of the sublime as a somewhat distant situation apparently but not actually dangerous—just enough to activate the desire for self-preservation. Crusoe at first wished to fight and kill the savages, but reflected that they had done him personally no injury. He envisaged a form of peace dictated by the law of nations. While of course there have been many interpretations of *Robinson Crusoe* in relation to colonialism or racism, Brown somewhat casually introduces the idea that Crusoe's initial rationalization of a violent response corresponds to the ethics of colonial violence.

The last major section and the easiest to read concerns European and Euro-American reactions to the Native American burial mounds of the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. Only by serendipity (the subject of

another long digression) might the observer distinguish between natural hills and most of these artificial earthworks. Moreover, the mounds remained opaque because only digging and destroying their structure could analyze them. Since Europeans had an image of North American savages without law, property, or agriculture, they could not imagine that Native Americans could have a society with the complex division of labor necessary to construct these mounds. Belief in a primitive race of mound builders suited European understanding of the Indians as savages. Local natives provided no help, since they could not recognize whether their ancestors were responsible for the mounds. Europeans speculated that the mounds were the work of the biblical Lost Tribes, Asians, or medieval Welsh migrants. The mounds also could be placed along the temporal-atemporal axis, since as opaque structures they stood outside of time. Archaeologists meanwhile attempted to place them in some sort of temporal sequence.

In the concluding section, the author attempts to parallel his effort at intellectual history—insisting that these non-European contacts helped constitute European theories of the aesthetic and helped deface Europe as the sovereign subject—with general economic history. In this view the violent impact of expansionist capitalism and unrestrained overseas commerce eventually brought industrial exploitation on Europe itself. Hence he sees the New World as impacting economically on the old, just as the exotic figures discussed helped demarcate the limits of European aesthetics.

Like the concluding section, this entire work has a plethora of summary judgments. What constitutes the aesthetic faculty will certainly provoke debate, as will the assumption that contact with non-Europeans created anthropological insecurity in Europe.

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