

## REWRITING HISTORY: THE SLAVE'S POINT OF VIEW IN *THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO*

MARÍA DEL MAR GALLEGO  
Universidad de Huelva

The general corpus of slave narratives written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries belongs undoubtedly to the so-called «abolitionist literature» of the period, that is, a type of literature whose main aim is the abolition of the slave system. To achieve this purpose, they need to counteract a series of derogatory and racist images to portray the actuality of African American identity from the slave's point of view. In so doing, these narratives deal with a new sense of reality based on an altered concept of history in opposition to the so-called «white» version of it. Moreover, such rewriting of history is also reader-oriented in the sense that it takes greatly into account the white readership to which these novels are mainly addressed as possible upholder of the abolitionist ideal. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, published in 1789, can be considered a good example of this type of literature due to its conscious and constant effort to shorten the distance between the narration itself and its reader, in a clear attempt to bring home the «horrors of the slave trade» and the subsequent need to do away with it.

Equiano's narrative clearly combines both purposes from the very outset: on the one hand, and despite some critics' opinions<sup>1</sup>, the abolitionist aim pervades the

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1. For instance Raymond Hedin argues that in general in eighteenth century slave narratives «though anti-slavery elements appear in them, they do not dominate» (633), because the social motivation is not crucial at that point. He goes on explaining that this fact is due to the overriding picaresque tone noticeable in the narratives that springs from the narrators' own experiences, in which, he insists, slavery has not been a determining feature. Such generalizations do not take into account slave narrators clearly positioning themselves in favour of abolitionist ideals from the very beginning, Equiano should suffice as a case in point.

text, as the very dedication addressed to the members of the British parliament uncompromisingly states:

May the God of Heaven inspire your hearts with peculiar benevolence on that important day when the question of Abolition is to be discussed, when thousands, in consequence of your determination, are to look for Happiness or Misery! (3)

The anti-slavery goal is at the heart of Equiano's text, its driving impulse, and not only at an abstract level, but at a quite concrete and crucial historical moment, in which the British parliament is deciding upon it. Indeed, Equiano's dedication makes clear his involvement with and interest in history. The lack of historical import ascribed to many slave narrators is thus denied in Equiano's case due to his deep concern with narrating historical events in his attempt to offer his own version, in a sense, reinterpreting them from his point of view. Following the slave narrators' motto of being true to fact,<sup>2</sup> Equiano engages in the process of rewriting history to suit his abolitionist zeal.

On the other hand, the effort to account for his personal decoding of history is intimately connected to the redefinition of the concept of African American identity. Equiano's narrative vividly exemplifies the need to reconstruct a «new self», an identity that not only deconstructs the negative image of the slave fostered by the racist ideology and supported by the plantation mystique,<sup>3</sup> but it also fulfills the compelling desire to give birth to a suitable sense of self that can respond to claims of humanity and dignity. In short, Equiano's second main motivation for writing his narrative is also another rhetorical aim: to convince white readers that «the slave was, as the inscription of a famous antislavery medal put it, 'a man and a brother' to whites» (Andrews 1). For the benefit of his white audience Equiano must demonstrate that he has not fallen victim to the so-called brutalizing effect of slavery, but quite the opposite, that he is, as Twagilimana argues, a rightful «member of their community»

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2. The relationship between history and truth is usually problematized in slave narratives due to the need to counteract the «official» version of slavery presented from a white standpoint. Slave narrators oppose it by depicting «true» renderings of the slave system that expose cruelty and brutality as its real consequences, so they continually emphasize their position as «truth-tellers». As Andrews puts it, one of the main propositions of slave narratives was «that the black narrator was, despite all prejudice and propaganda, a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk» (1). Veracity becomes thus a key element to persuade the white audience of the authenticity of the narrative, and, consequently, of the necessity to abolish such degraded and corrupted system.

3. The so-called «plantation mystique» consists mainly of an idealized portrayal of plantation life, in which slaves are depicted as stereotypical characters living happily with their master, who, as a good father, takes care of his «children». This idyllic picture becomes intrinsically related to the racist ideology of the period that defends slavery as the natural state of being for African slaves. To cite a few examples, Thomas Dixon's two novels with very illustrative titles *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (1903) and *The Clansman* (1905).

(52). In order to make his narrative acceptable for his intended audience, Equiano has to create bonds with his readers that allow for the identification needed to win them over to the abolitionist side.

Hence he is forced to adopt the value system upheld by this readership, but such choice on his part generates an important difficulty that Byerman points out, acknowledging that a slave narrator needs to account for «How had he managed to avoid the brutalizing effects of the system and to adopt so successfully the values of his audience?» (70). The answer to this essential question leads to the particular stance that Equiano as a narrator employs, a dual position that acquiesces in the values held by the intended audience, while simultaneously exposing the contradictions of the slave system, firmly denouncing and condemning its ongoing practice. This position is the product of an inner conflict that has been rightly defined as «double consciousness»,<sup>4</sup> that asserts yet criticises the value system of his readers. As a result, Equiano necessarily partakes of what the critic Chinosole calls a paradox:

The individual most endangered by loss of critical acumen toward the dominant ideology, because of the intimacy and vulnerability of a privileged position, is the very one who can use that position to advantage and strike a telling blow. (50)

According to Chinosole, slave narrators possess a «privileged position» insofar as their socio-economic position allows them to write at that time, which means that they have to pay «some degree of mental colonization» (50). Obviously, adopting the white value system implies some kind of mental colonization, but working from within that white value system grants Equiano the chance to convey his abolitionist input, counteracting and discrediting contrary pro-slavery claims. Therefore, Equiano appropriates white ideology to fit his personal needs, subverting and reinterpreting it.

To achieve his ends, Equiano uses different strategies and disguises that, thanks to his dual point of view, can be easily related to the trickster's or picaresque's standpoint. Many critics have commented on the «natural fit for picaresque» (Hedin 633) of slave narrators that could be perfectly applied to Equiano.<sup>5</sup> Evidently, being, as Gates

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4. Coming from W. E. B. DuBois' famous concept of double consciousness delineated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), it basically stands for the warring sides of each African American: his/her Africanness and Americanness, and the possible reconciliation of these two halves into a unity. In the case of slave narrators their double consciousness is inherent to their literary endeavor: to identify with their white readers, yet to be able to criticise their conception of the world and of the pair race/identity with relation to slavery.

5. See, for example, Henry Louis Gates, «Binary Oppositions in Chapter One of 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself'» in *Afro-American Literature*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1979: 212-232); Raymond Hedin, «The American Slave Narrative: The Justification of the Picaresque» in *American Literature* 53.4 (January 1982: 630-645) or Stefania Piccinato, «The Slave Narrative and the Picaresque Novel» in *The Black Columbiad*, ed. Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994: 88-98).

portrays him, a «self-conscious writer» (*Signifying* 158), his adoption of a double position is dictated by the need to «wear a mask» in front of his audience in order to maintain interest in his narrative and to further his abolitionist view. Otherwise, any mistake on his part «could alienate the very audience that he needed if he were to accomplish his goal» (Samuels 64). To avoid the danger of losing the very audience he is trying to reach, he must suit all the requirements and limitations imposed upon slave narrators by the value system of this same intended audience. The only way out of the dichotomy between pleasing his audience and being true to history and to himself is the use of certain rhetorical strategies that lay stress on both conventionality together with new approaches and insights.

Owing to Equiano's employment of such different rhetorical strategies, his narrative could be characterized as definitely reader-oriented with a twist, as it were. That is to say, Equiano makes use of rhetorical tools with a twofold objective: to win his audience's favor in his battle against slavery by means of conventional devices, while conveying a quite unconventional message about African Americans and their identity. Hence, within this framework of conventions, Equiano is capable of making a very personal statement about his position towards white ideology, attacking it while seemingly agreeing with it. At the end of the analysis Equiano's subversive critique will be clearer, especially with reference to two fundamental issues: the concepts of white civilization and white religion, which will prompt a final reflection on the nature of the slave's point of view as far as history is concerned. Starting with the reader-oriented strategies now, they can be divided in two main groups: firstly, conventional authentication devices, such as the inclusion of pictures, prefaces, documents of all kinds (legal documents, letters to authorities, etc ...). Secondly, he also takes advantage of conventional ways of telling his story, which includes the tradition of the so-called «adventure novel», together with continuous addresses to the reader.

Taking up the first set of conventions, the authentication ones, the first page of the book opens with Equiano's portrait, which is a classic instance of these authentication techniques.<sup>6</sup> The importance of this picture lies in the fact that it acknowledges both his race and his existence as an actual human being. As the editor of the volume affirms: «a signed engraving of the black author holding an open text (the Bible)» (1) is one of the «strategies of self-representation» effectively used by Equiano in his narrative. In the portrait Equiano's holding the Bible also relates him from the outset with the key ideas of literacy and religion that are to play a decisive role in the reader's acceptance of his autobiography. So, right from the beginning of the narrative, Equiano seems to be quite aware of the importance of the concepts of identity and veracity that actually become the target of possible charges a white readership can attach to his narrative.

Actually, these charges are dealt with in the very preface of the work, which reveals itself as a suitable means of authentication too, because it recounts in great

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6. For a full development of authentication conventions in slave narratives, see Robert Stepto's first chapter of *From Behind the Veil* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

detail the white reaction to the publication of the narrative. Basically, this response was two-sided: on the one hand, it produced the desirable «degree of humane feeling in men's minds» (5), confirming the success of the narrative's intentionality to make the reader identify with the narrator in order to contribute to his antislavery propaganda. On the other, though, it recalls the persecution to which the author is subjected, which takes several forms that are very telling, continually taking to the forefront the crucial ideas of identity and veracity:

In the first place, «they tried to asperse his character, by representing him as an impostor; and to invalidate his testimony, by accusing him of wilful falsehoods. They carried the violence of their passions to such a height as to assert that he was not a native of Africa» (5-6). So the first charge is that of falsehood, of basing his tale on a complete lie, because his very existence is suspected. The picture that opens the narrative tries to answer to this accusation, with the help of the dedication, in which Equiano calls his autobiography a «genuine narrative» (3), based on only true facts regarding his own life. In this way the author is proposing his version of history as a truthful one, aligning himself with the rest of slave narrators in their pursuit of truth.

Secondly, the author's account of his African origins is also doubted on the basis of the impossibility of recalling so vividly a land that the author was forced to leave at a very young age. Behind these apparently natural misgivings about such a detailed account, there seems to lie a certain resistance to believe any of it on the part of a white audience who has a very different idea of what Africa is like. Nevertheless, Equiano's own opinion about it differs completely, because, as the editor confirms, he tries to give a «believable account of cultural life among the Igbo peoples of what is now eastern Nigeria» (XVI). However, this last statement may sound contradictory due to the fact that Equiano is using a white author's description of Africa as main source. Anthony Benezet's in *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, published in 1789. Basically he uses this background information to infuse his story with a matter-of-fact tone, that gives weight to his «family authentication» method, because, as Twagilimana justifies, «he wants to give authority and legitimacy to his narrative» (52). The interesting aspect of his appropriation of Benezet's text lies in his idyllic depiction of Africa, markedly opposing the «white» description of the same reality. So this is only one instance of Equiano's method of transforming history according to his own personal needs in the narration, thus creating a new reality.

Thirdly, Equiano is charged with superstition, because of the recurrent employment of the fate motif in his narrative. Actually he seems to be quite dependent on fate, which rules his life, as he himself occasionally admits: «but thinking, as usual, it was no use to murmur at the decrees of fate, I submitted without repining, and we went to St. Eustatia» (98). However, his idea of fate seems to be intimately linked to his concept of God, because he is ready to acknowledge his divine power over all things. When confronted with superstitious practices by other slaves, he affirms: «Let us again face the winds and seas, and swear not, but trust to God, and he will deliver us» (117). With this unconditional trust in God, he definitely establishes himself as a Christian in the eyes of his white readers that can thus feel some kind of connection with him. He introduces the concept of a Christian African American which calls considerably into question the audience's previous prejudices and beliefs. Religion

serves Equiano's purposes, since it compromises any adherence that is not founded on what critics name «true Christianity».<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, his literacy is also attacked: «it is not improbable that some English writer has assisted him in the compilement, or at least, the correction of his book, for it is sufficiently well-written» (8). To this Equiano answers with the narrative itself, which becomes the ultimate proof of his literacy. Also in his dedication he acknowledges his authorship in the following way: «I am sensible I ought to entreat your pardon for addressing to you a work so wholly devoid of literary merit; but, as the production of an unlettered African ...» (3). Thus, by means of another conventional strategy, that of the lack of «literary merit» of the book, the author is pointing out at his ownership of the narrative and also at his subsequent literacy. This last allegation serves to establish the author's literacy as his own means of self-empowerment and self-representation, without the need for external aid. Equiano is in this way proclaiming himself as an independent entity capable of undertaking the control of the narrative.

Therefore, the basic imputations that the preface shows have to do with the author's own identity, his literacy and his doubtful adherence to true facts. In one word, his story is suspected on the basis of being untrue, of not being an acceptable version of history. Obviously Equiano's account remodels history because it introduces new parameters that did not exist before, especially the existence of a unique African American identity which can be, nevertheless, so close to the dominant ideology: Christian and literate. To support his outlook, apart from the conventions above mentioned, Equiano includes all kinds of documents as authentication devices. These documents can be classified in three main categories: legal documents, letters and biblical quotations.

The legal documents establish once more the reality of his own existence and the truthfulness of his account. Among these documents, the manumission form is a good example (Appendix A), due to the fact that the actual circumstances of his freedom are described in great detail, granting him «all right, title, dominion, sovereignty, and property» (179). This document setting him free accomplishes the purpose of legally declaring his free status and invoking the figures of his latter master Robert King and of the Register Terry Legay, two white men, as his direct witnesses. Moreover, his freedom underlines once more his special social status, setting Equiano apart from the other slaves, but, at the same time, implying Equiano's rightful belonging to the free community, that is, Equiano becomes one other member of the white group to whom he is addressing his narrative.

With regards to the letters, they range from the so-called «certificates of behaviour» written by his different masters to letters written by himself. Dealing with the first ones, their main function is again to testify to his actual existence and, very

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7. As Butterfield rightly observes, slave narrators are «careful to distinguish between 'true' Christianity and the religion used by their masters to justify the slave system and teach them obedience» (15). Thus religion becomes a weapon in the slave narrators' hands to attack the white value system from within.

significantly, to his exemplary behaviour: «... he has behaved himself well, and discharged his duty with honesty and assiduity» (121). Another master, Charles Irvin, insists on this characteristic by recommending him as «perfectly trustworthy» (159). Here the emphasis is placed on his honesty as a distinctive trait of his character, which can be also applied to his narrative by extension. The second set of letters, those written by Equiano himself, perform a very specific function: to confirm the author's literacy by bringing in several situations, in which the character shows his mastery of the writing skills: from a letter of thanks to the Quakers to another addressed to the Queen demanding the abolition of the slave system. The very richness and variety of his vocabulary recall a cultivated man, who, as he himself repeatedly admits, «speaks too good English» for a slave and writes it too, as his narrative manifests. Once more literacy symbolises the path chosen by the ex-slave to disclose his ability to represent himself and change other existing versions of history.

Finally, the Bible appears right from the picture of himself that opens the book as an important source of authentication. By representing himself while holding it, he ties himself to a long tradition of Christians who consider the Bible their means of self-empowerment. Besides, through the consistent strategy of quoting from it at different strategic points in the narration, Equiano proves both his literacy and his intimate union with the Christian beliefs that illuminate his life, therefore identifying himself with the Christian majority of his readers. His profound faith is stressed from the very quotation that precedes his narrative which is very significant: «Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid; for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation» (2). The choice of this passage for the opening is quite appropriate, since it already marks the importance of the Christian religion as Equiano's «salvation»: by means of his constant references to it, Equiano is actually bridging the gap between his audience and himself and, consequently, religion becomes the most effective way to promote his abolitionist ideal.

Together with these authentication methods, the autobiography relies on other strategies related to the internal structure of the narrative, that is to say, the way in which the narrative unfolds itself, which can be also defined as conventional devices, such as the «adventure novel» tradition and the direct address to the reader. Both strategies are also reader-oriented due to the fact that they try to approach the reader from different angles, finding new devices to suit his/her expectations and demands. Whereas the adventure tradition is employed in disguise as it were, since Equiano systematically reverses some of its basic features; the constant address to the reader calls attention to the narrator's awareness of his readers' crucial role in securing his goals.

In the first case, the tradition of the so-called «adventure novel», a very fashionable genre at the time with classic representatives like Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, serves as one of the main literary frameworks for the narrative. In this sense, the author is consciously lifting from a well-known tradition for the reader, the adventure tale, in order to create a common discourse universe with his white audience and then subvert it. By reversing some of the patterns the reader is familiar with, the author is capable of pinpointing at significant aspects and make them stand out from the rest.

One of these patterns concerns the narrative structure itself. This tradition dictates the structuring of the book into different chapters according to the different situations that are to be developed. Each chapter is headed by a brief summary, in which the main facts concerning those situations are given. The selection of these main facts is, however, clearly endowed with a sense of the message the author wants to convey. Due to this desire, an apparent objective summary combines mere facts with such things as feelings, convictions, beliefs, etc ... For example, the heading of chapter VII talks about «the author's disgust at the West Indies», «Applies to his master, who accepts it, and grants his manumission, to his great joy» or «Impositions on free negroes as usual» (96). As a whole, these headings become a sort of narrative of their own, which shares the same kind of purpose with the actual narration of events: to arise the reader's sympathetic feelings for the author's cause.

Another feature of the adventure genre which is reversed in Equiano's story is the idea of the protagonist as a conventional hero. This pattern is explicitly rejected by the narrator himself in the following passage: «I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant» (11). Despite this blunt refusal, the character of his tale is portrayed with heroic overtones on many occasions, for example when, due to the captain's negligence, they are about to drown but his efforts save many men's lives: «There were only four people that would work with me at the oars ... But had we not worked in this manner, I really believe the people could not have been saved» (111). Again this is another illustration of the way in which Equiano revises white history in this passage because the four people were all colored people, so they become the true saviours and heroes of the story, and not the whites. The narration of the variety of trials and sufferings that he endures as a slave and, later, as a free man, also seem to support this heroic quality of his character.

In spite of this tendency, the author continually insists on his unheroic behaviour, on his lack of vanity or personal aspirations to praise in writing his autobiography: «I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation» (12). The character's natural bent towards heroism is then limited by the narrator's need to appear humble in the eyes of a white audience, who would not accept him otherwise. Thus the reversal of the conventional mode of adventure telling is adapted to the autobiography as another way of authenticating it for the white readership's benefit.

The final narrative strategy used by Equiano is the most directly related to his white audience, because it actually consists of the continuous address to it throughout his narration. Sometimes this address takes the form of long paragraphs filled with rhetorical questions, in which the author specifies his main points: «Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire, and every noble sentiment? ...» (24). These passages are the best samples of abolitionist ideas in the book. Other times, they are made up of small references to the reader's acknowledged presence: «I therefore hasten to the conclusion of a narrative, which I fear the reader may think already sufficiently tedious» (167). Anyway, what is telling is the fact that the author is always aware of the presence of a specific type of readership to which his narrative is directed.



So far all the different strategies above mentioned seem to take into account the reader in a very conscious way as the main target for the diffusion of the abolitionist creed. This awareness is then the basic guideline Equiano adopts both for the external and internal configuration of his narration. Yet, beneath this main purpose there seem to be some undercurrents that unveil an altered image of the narrator, that of the picaro who, due to his double vision, is especially keen on criticising and debunking some important concepts and myths such as white civilization, the distinction between white and black ways of life and cultures and the reality of the Christian religion. These new approaches constitute the basic foundations of Equiano's reconstruction and rewriting of history from a definite perspective that is intrinsically African American, and therefore challenges any white definitions or interpretations.

As far as white civilization and the divergences found when comparing white with black cultures, there seems to be a contradictory statement on the author's part: on the one hand, due to the presence of a white audience, he feels almost obliged to bow to it by acknowledging its superiority with respect to him and the other members of the black race: «I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and their manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them» (51). This humble attitude contrasts strikingly with the account he gives of his African life, in which he takes pains in representing its good qualities.

The Igbo people are depicted as a model civilization, very virtuous people, who maintain the truth as their point of reference, and are very clean and civilized: «We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets» (14). Another basic trait is their religious affiliation, which is equated to that of the Jews in all the important facts: belief in one god, circumcision, ablutions, rituals, etc ... Their society is based on love, family and tradition. Even if slavery exists among them, it is a very mild sort of slavery when compared to what goes on in apparently «civilized» countries. This idealized picture of African culture obviously counteracts racist opinions and questions the very essence of civilization, since the «civilized» whites are allowing for the continuation of the cruel and grim slave system that violates any «civilized» conception of the world.

The same can be applied to other black characters who, as a whole, are represented as being capable of humane feelings, of actual caring for others and, even, of bravery when necessary, opposing thus the brutal white characters. The episode recalled above when Equiano saves the crew aboard the ship is also very revealing in this case: the four people that helped him were, significantly enough, «three black men, and a Dutch Creole sailor» while «not one of the white men did any thing to preserve their lives. Indeed they got so drunk they were not able» (111). A striking contrast is presented between the «good» black characters who are willing to risk their lives to save the others and the «bad» white men that are either too inefficient or too cruel and selfish to help other fellowmen in need. Again what Equiano is foregrounding here is the need to redefine the traditional conception of the hero to include brave African American men who actually deserve to be ranked as such.

A very similar «subversive» message seems to lie behind Equiano's judgement of the white sense of Christianity. His search for an appropriate way of guiding his newly-born faith proves to be quite unfruitful among white churches, with the exception of the Quakers. One case in point is the account of the rape as a usual part of the slave trade: «it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves ... I have known our mates commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace not of christians only, but of men» (74). The slave system, which allows for such atrocities as this, cannot conform to the Christian rules of charity and compassion. Equiano is directly invoking true Christian beliefs to condemn the sort of practices that are often dispensed within the slave system and, hence, disapproving of the whole religious structure created to perpetuate it.

Therefore Equiano's autobiography is not merely a collection of conventional devices whose main aim resides in conveying the abolition of a system of brutality and lack of humanity towards slaves. The author makes use of each of these devices to gain the white reader's trust and acceptance of his narrative as true to life and worthy of his/her attention and possible adherence to the cause it defends on the grounds of common humanity. In depth, it also carries a certain critique of the pillars of the white civilization it intends to address, which could not be overtly stated at the time by an ex-slave in the abolitionist cause. The narrative finally presents itself as the cloak for this implicit critique on a white society whose core is corrupt, because it mainly consists of a slave system which is a constant source of degradation, immorality and decadence, thus presenting the other side of the picture, a different vision of the history of slavery from the slave's point of view.

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