Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich, XXXVIII 1-2
PL ISSN 0084-4446

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THE RHETORIC OF LIBERATION IN HARRIET JACOB'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL, WRITTEN BY HERSELF*

Slave narratives, defined as "personal account(s) of life in bondage and the struggle to be free" (Foster 95), used to be a popular genre during the abolitionist era in the United States. Por a long time, the genre has been associated with the names of its male practitioners, most notably with the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, considered to be the archetypal narrative of heroic male slaves.[1] As a result of the revived interest in autobiography, and in the course of the institutionalization of African American Studies and Women's Studies as mainstream disciplines in the American academy, we have been witnessing a continuous retrieval of female slave narratives.[2] The inclusion of works by women in the slave narrative genre has led to the revaluation of the texts written by ex-slaues not

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[1] Other famous female slave narratives include *A Narrative of the Adventure and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1838); *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (1849);*Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An America Slave, Written by Himself* (1849); *The Life of John Thompson, A Fugitive Slave; Containing his history of 23 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (1856); or Douglass's later autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). For a more detailed discussion these narratives, see Davis and Gates (1985).

[2] In addition to Jacobs's narrative, Braxon mentions the following antebellum titles: *Memoirs of Jane Blake* (1843); *Narrative of Joanna, an Emancipated Slave of Surinam* (1834); *Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown* (1860); *Louisa Piquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1861); and *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Colored Woman* (1863). An important role in the restoration of female slave narratives has been played by the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers, with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as its general editor.

only sfrom the perspective of race, but also that of gender.[3] Moreover, if in the past the ethnocentric American criticism questioned the status of slave narratives as literature and assigned to them a merely historical value, more recently such narratives have attracted renewed critical interest and have been reclaimed by Afro-American critics as canonical texts.[4]

Published in 1861, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* is one of the most important antebellum female slave narratives. Its status as fiction or a factual story had variously been argued prior to the 1980s, when Jean Fagan Yellin started to publish her groundbreaking research proving the authenticity of Jacobs's narrative and its autobiographic character. To summarize the story briefly, *Incidents*, in which Jacobs assumes the name of Linda Brent, recalls Linda's early childhood as "happy". She says that she was not aware of being a slave until the age of six. Her first mistress taught her to read and write. When Linda was twelve, the "good" mistress died, but Linda was not freed as expected; instead, she was bequeathed to a five-year-old niece of her former mistress, the daughter of Dr. Flint who later becomes her oppressor and tormentor. She describes her suffering at the hands of Dr. Flint and his jealous wife. Persistently refusing to become Flint's concubine, she finds support and strength in her grandmother. To avoid Flint's harassment, she accepts sexual favour with another white "gentleman", Mr. Sands, with whom she has two children, Benjamin and Ellen. Determined to achieve freedom for her children, she devises a plan for her escape through concealment. She spends seven years hidden in an attic crawl space of her grandmother's house, from where she can deceive Flint, making him believe that she ran away. She writes letters that are mailed by friends from New York. She persuades the children's father to buy them from Flint; Sands, however, fails to set them free. They are allowed to live in the grandmother's home, and Linda can hear their voices from her hiding. Ellen is later taken to live in New York. Finally, Linda Brent escapes to the North, where she is reunited with her children. Ironically, even Flint's death

[3] Among the most important feminist readings of female slave narratives, se Carby (1987), Fox-Genovese (1987), Valerie Smith (1987), Yellin (1989), or Sidonie Smith (1993).

[4] For the critics whose attitude to slave narratives as literature is rather dismissive, see Blassinagame and Olney. For other readings, se Stepto (1979), Andrews (1986), Couser (1989), or Foster (1993).

does not bring her release. She has to be bought and emancipated by her employer, Mrs. Bruce.

It has been suggested that Jacobs's text speaks more through its silences. After all, there are several silencing factors in her narrative that compel her to work under the pseudonym. Writing a story of her sexual exploitation, she has to be careful not to offend her audience's Victorian moral standards if she wants to win her readers for the anti-slavery cause. Besidee, Brent/Jacobs is aware of her master's threats; even to speak of his quilty practices "was an offence that never went unpunished... (and) Dr. Flint swore he would kill (her), if (she were) not as silent as the grave" (28).[5] She is additionally constrained by her religious grandmother's code of chastity ("I feared her as well as loved her", ibid.), as well as by her own pride. In the most painful chapter, "The Trials of Girlhood", where Jacobs/Brent addresses the issue of rape and sexual abuse of slave women, she leaves many things out. However, she also feels that it is not her silence that has to be broken, but rather the silence of those who do nothing to prevent the sexual behaviour mandated by the white patriarchy: "In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right? Would that I had more ability! But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak!" (29-30).

Despite all these silences, I would argue that the Brent/Jacobs narrative is one of the most eloquent texts on black resistance that could have been produced in its time. Doubly marginalized as a slave and a woman, she has to negotiate carefully her right to become a writing subject against the pressure of dominant mythologies and ideologies, race and gender scripts, political and cultural discourses, authorship constraints, as well as genres, rhetoric, and conventions that "enter" her and try to "contain" her and her story. Thus textually, her narrative enacts the same oppression that was lived daily by its author and other slave women. The condition of slavery is reflected by the "colonized" text it produces, the text colonized by the discourses and rhetoric of the oppressor. However, Harriet Jacobs's narrative reveals its subversive potential in producing a text that resists any critical totalization and appropriation. Through the act of writing, Brent/Jacobs has gained her freedom, freedom in the sense of subverting the discourses that try to "contain" her body and her text.

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[5] All subsequent references to Jacob's text are from the 1987 Harvard edition (edited by Yellin) and will be given in parenthesis.

The most striking subversion performed by the Brent/Jacobs narrative is her questioning of the generic convention of the slave narrative. G. Thomas Couser puns "slave narrative" as "enslaved narrative", and views slave narratives as metaphors of their own writing, where "the narrator's progress toward freedom, like the slave's, was hindered, if not obstructed, by the surveillance of both friend and foe" (110). Such narratives were subject to intense scrutiny by both abolitionist sponsors and pro-slavery critics because of their controversial content and aims. Recent analysis has emphasized the narrator's "continued subjection to the racism implicit in linguistic and narrative conventions" (Couser 120), and especially what has been characterized as "race rituals" enacted by white editors who "in effect addressed white readers over the invisible bodies of black narrators" (ibid.). The authenticating apparatus of abolitionist sponsors, professed enemies of racism, "itself enacted a form of discrimination and domination" (Couser 120). The same "race ritual" has been re-enacted by literary critics of Jacobs's narrative, for example by John Blassingame, for whom *Incidents* contains too much melodrama, and who questions its authenticity on the basis of literary merit. Ironically, both the "authentication" process and the framing critical discourse validating Jacobs's authorship are prefigured in the narrative by the slaves recollections of the auction block where their body was similarly "marketed" by white slave traders.

Another example of the parallel "race rituals" in the abolitionist and contemporary critical treatment of slave narratives is the demand of a formulaic, conventional form. Regarded by abolitionists as important propaganda tools, the narratives had to be edited and read as typical rather than individual stories, which often led to the suppression of the black authors' individuality. In a way, James Olney mirrors the politics of the slave narrative's production in his critical elaboration of the "Master Plan for Slave Narratives", disqualifying them as autobiography, narrowly understood as expression of the unique individuality of its author.[6]

Jacobs subverts the conventional slave narrative not only by countering its presentation of slave women as completely helpless vietims, but also by de-emphasizing the classic story of the triumph of the individual will in order to show "a triumphant self-in-relation" (Valerie Smith 33).

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[6] Writing about the self of autobiography, Annette Niemtzow reminds us of the difficulties encountered by black (and especially female) authors: "all definitions of self are defined by whites, for the word itself posits a concept controlled by whites" (102).

Brent/Jacobs's narrative departs from the linearity of masculine tales by presenting "incidents", fragments of her life; she thus resists the totalizing drive of a life-narrative. Her "escape" takes on an unusual form of hiding within the enemy territory; she wants not simply to run away from her master but to assert control over her children's life.

Most important, however, she addresses the female audience, seeking to establish a community of empathetic readers, with her famous abolitionists patrons Lydia Maria Child and Amy Post as models of her "implied reader" (Andrews 1986: 247). Brent/Jacobs expresses this idea in her narrative when talking about "raising friends" (140). The title page of her book is significant in this respect. Here she "constructs" her reader as female, using a quotation from Isaiah ("Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech," XXXII,9). Also, the first epigraph is attributed to an anonymous woman of North Carolina, who sounds very much like Jacobs herself. It can be read as Jacobs's "clandestine" way for asserting control over her own text and her attempt to wrench authority and validating power from her white protectors. Even though the abolitionist convention of the slave narrative required that she rely on the word of powerful white women, Child and Post, who had to act as literary "midwives" in order to give legitimacy to Jacobs's project, she still forces the reader to accept her own validation of *Incidents*.

The subversion of the abolitionist flanking apparatus that is signalled by the above features of Jacobs's narrative seems to be unique. The narrative proper is bracketed by two pairs of documents: the inner pair is supplied by Child's Introduction and Amy Post's personal testimonial in the Appendix, and the outer pair by Jacobs's Preface and George W. Lowther's testimonial. Thus the book's first words are those of the author, a free black woman, while its last words are those of Lowther, a free black man. Moreover, the two appended testimonials were solicited by Jacobs. This pattern evidently subverts the hierarchy of race and gender characteristic of authentication by white males (Couser 136). A similar "determination not to relinquish control of her book" is recorded by Yellin, who quotes Jacobs's correspendence with Lydia M. Child (Intro XXIII).

Jacobs thus foregrounds the distance between herself and her white benefactresses and shows that the idea of "sisterhood", although signalled by their antislavery rhetoric, is often undermined by the complexities of southern life. There is an unspeken confliet between white mistresses and black slave women over their sharing of the master's bed.

Jacobs frequently mentions jealousy of white mistresses, including that of her own mistress, Mrs. Flint. In addition, there is also the issue of children's attachment to their mammies (Jacobs refers to it on p.20). Brent/Jacobs devotes an entire chapter ("The Jealous Mistress") to foreground the unbridgeable gap between the ladies and their slaves. As Hazel Carby says, "'Sisterhood' between white and black women was realized rarely in the text of *Incidents*" (51). The polarization between the lives of white sisters and black sisters is stressed throughout by the narrator.

Consequently, for Brent/Jacobs, the narration is a performative act; she constantly performs self-translation for her white audience, negotiating and mediating back and forth between the two worlds, the southern world of slavery and the "free" world of the North, as can be seen, for example, in the chapter called "The Slaves' New Year's Day", where she contrasts the meaning of New Year for free families with the slave mother's anxiety before the auction that always took place on January 2 and that could separate her from her children. Another chapter called "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life" is an excellent example of what can be called Jacobs's "double discourse". Presenting herself as an active perpetrator and a victim at the same time, she is situated both inside her narrative and outside it, oscillating between what might be called her rhetoric of liberation and her audience's rhetoric of moral absolutism according to which hers is a story of a "fallen woman". Her "balancing act" is well illustrated by her justification of her choice of the more agreeable lover as "a man who is not married, and who is neither her master" (54-5), where the former characteristic is to satisfy the moral dictates of her audience whereas the latter her own defiance.

Ultimately, language becomes a place of struggle: the multiple voices intermingle within her, the voices of the oppressed and oppressors. She seeks a counter-language, of which bell hooks says that "While it may resemble the colonizer's tongue, it has undergone a transformation, it has been irrevocably changed" (150). Perhaps one of the ways of viewing Jacobs's unique accomplishment in articulating such counter-discourse would be to interpret it through the postcolonial category of hybridity. The hybridity of Jacobs's narrative reminds us constantly of the mutuality of the slave culture and the master culture, of her dual African heritage and Western cultural heritage. In fact, hybridity can even be seen as a condition of African American writers. It also recalls W. E. B. DuBois's metaphor of "double-consciousness" which he used in 1897 to describe the bicultural identity of African-Americans. However,

one has to be cautious and better heed Gayatri Spivak's warning about the use of such categories as "hybridity" or "androgyny", which too often make us forget about differences. The following quotation from Elizabeth Fox-Genovese can be helpful in understanding the effects of cultural colonization on the minde of the colonized:

> To write the account of one's self is to inscribe it in a culture that for each of us is only partially our own... Few have written more movingly or with greater anger of the toll extracted by cultural colonization than Frantz Fanon. In particular, he walked the narrow boundary between reecrding the dreadful impact of specific instances of colonization and raising the concept of colonization to the status of a metaphor for all of our dependent status in a dominant culture. The autobiographies of Afro-American women similarly delineate a speeific history of colonization and offer a compelling metaphor for the dependency of the human spirit on the communities and forms of expression to which it belongs... (They) expose the condition of any self as hostage to society, politics, and language. (177)The hybridity of Brent/Jacobs's narrative, her being situated both inside and outside of the discourses she engages, is precisely what accounts for its subversive potential. According to Sidonie Smith, from her oppositional position at the margins, Jacobs interrogates even as she imitates, "(n)egotiating the intersections of multivalent discourses (and) effectively troubl(ing) all these centering rhetorics simultaneously" (45).

A good example of how the borrowing of white man's language can be put to a subversive use by the slave is the attitude to religion. Linda Brent, like her uncle Benjamin, seem to represent a new generation of slaves who are more rebellious. Her rebellion is contrasted with her grandmother's piety as a strategy of coping and a protective shield (22). On the other hand, Jacobs employs the antislavery rhetoric derived from the Bible (slaveholders as "fiends", "the atmosphere of hell" pervading the master's household, "the serpent of Slavery", etc.). In the chapter which most extensively documents atrocities perpetrated against slaves ("Sketches of Neighbouring Slaveholders"), she makes comments about religion that reveal how Christianity, a tool of oppression, has been appropriated by slaves to give them a sense of moral superiority towards their masters (50).

The fact that Jacobs is a mulatto acquires a special significance in the context of her metaphorical hybridity, her being of two worlds. Even her body carries the traces of the same story of sexual exploitation that she unveils in her narrative. It gives another ironic twist to the abolition-

ist idea of "sisterhood" between white and black women, which in the South was often realized through blood and milk, as in the case of Jacobs's mother and her mother's mistress who were in fact "foster sisters" (6). Brent/Jacobs reminds her reader of this particular paradox epitomized by the body of the mulatto: "And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?" (44). She literally acknowledges her "hybridity" and turns it into a source of strength: "What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!" (78).

Linda Brent learns to draw strength from abuse: "though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered" (19). Throughout her text, one finds repeatedly pronounced the assertion of her will ("He that is willing to be a slave, let him be a slave", p.26). She fights with words, talking back to her master. The most subversive form of resistance she "invents" for herself is learning how to turn what has been used as the oppressive tool against the oppressor (in other words, appropriating the master's tools to dismantle the master's house). When pressed into sexual submission by Dr. Flint, she decides to take control of her sexuality and use it to defeat him. This possibility of turning the site of oppression into a site of resistance has been recognized by some of Jacobs's critics. For example, Valerie Smith writes about Jacobs's garret, or a "loophole of retreat" as she calls it, as "a place of withdrawal (and) an avenue of escape... Repeatedly (Jacobs) escapes overwhelming persecutions only by choosing her own space of confinement: the stigma of unwed motherhood over sexual submission to her master; concealment in one friend's home, another friend's closet, and her grandmother's garret over her own and her children's enslavement on a plantation; Jim Crowism and the threat of the Fugitive Slave Law in the North over institutionalized slavery at home" (29-30).

One can find traces of the rhetoric of liberation in Brent/Jacobs's narrative. The chapter called "What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North" provides ample illustration. She insists that slaves themselves should recognize their condition as inhuman, stop being passive, and reject slavery: "If those heathens in our Christian land had as much teaching as some Hindoos, they would... know that liberty is more valuable than life. They would begin to understand their own capabilities, and exert themselves to become men and women" (43). She implies here that accepting their condition, slaves deprive themselves of their humanity; they are morally responsible to fight for their freedom (otherwise, they remain "heathen"). It is a very modern view of slavery that recog-

nizes the possibility of agency on the slaves' part rather than interpreting slavery in terms ofwhite perpetrators and passive black victims. In a sense, Jacobs seems to suggest that unless they embrace freedom as their highest value, slaves "collaborate" in their own misery. Her rejection of a gold chain offered to her baby by her father's former mistress becomes a powerful symbol: "I did not like the emblem. I wanted no chain to be fastened on my daughter, not even if its links were of gold" (79).

There is but one step from here to Jacobs's indictment of the materialistic grounding of the institution of slavery. On several occasions, she seems to speak the language of materialist analysis, which reveals her sense of social injustice, combined with her awareness of the slaves. material contribution to the wealth of their masters. She knows the value of their work. At one point, she refers to the silver candelabra which had been purchased with the money stolen from her grandmother; ironically, this "heirloom" that "will be handed down in the family, from generation to generation" (11) will be a reminder of a double inheritance, white and black. She understands the mechanism of economic exploitation of slaves when she says that the slave's "own labour was stolen from him" (48). Moreover, she has a natural sense of class solidarity (or rather lack thereof) when talking about "the low whites" who showed their subsevvience to the slaveholders, "not reflecting that the power which trampled on the coloured people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation"(64). As William L. Andrews observes, she reaches toward "the materialist discourse" at the end of her narrative when she "seems to be saying that power, the ability to act on and realize freedom, stems, in the North as well as the South, not from principle but from property, from that which can be claimed like a home or a hearthstone as 'my own'" (1992:231).

Even though Brent/Jacobs is granted her freedom in the end, the dream of her life remains unfulfilled. Her longing for a home acquires a new symbolic meaning: both in the South and in the North, she is homeless. She is homeless in a white man's country; her dispossession is due to her gender, race, and class: a woman, a black person, and a domestic servant who cannot secure a home for her children.

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RETORYKA WYZWOLENIA W *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL* (*Przypadki z życia niewolnicy*) autorstwa Harriet Jacobs

(Streszczenie)

Narracje niewolników stanowią odrębny gatunek twórczości, który cieszył się dużą popularnością w Stanach w okresie abolicjonizmu. Przez długi czas krytyka amerykańska kwestionowała ich literackość, traktując je wyłącznie na prawach dokumentu historycznego. W ostatnich latach przewartościowano ten osąd i zajęto się gruntownym zbadaniem cech gatunkowych i walorów literackich tego typu narracji, odzyskując przy okazji wiele cennych dzieł dla tradycji. Niniejsza praca analizuje jedną z najbardziej cenionych narracji niewolniczych, opublikowaną przez Harriet Jacobs w 1861 roku, skupiając się na jej cechach nowatorskich i różnicach wynikających z faktu, że autorką jest kobieta.