



Historical Representations and Literary Imagination in Slave Narratives: Case Study of “Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown”

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Abstract - The aim of this article is to distinguish historical representations from literary imagination in «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown». Slave narratives appear in the era of slavery. The unprivileged position of their initiators and their quest of liberty justify the reason to share their experiences as a means of propaganda against slavery. Besides their autobiographical or historical dimension, slave narratives are also literary productions, with an aesthetics that is the expression of Africanness. In «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown», fiction resides on the mode of perception and representation of former slaves.

Keywords: Slave narrative, literary imagination, Africanness, Manichaeism, deterritorialization, subversion.

Résumé - L'objectif du présent article est de distinguer l'imagination littéraire des représentations historiques dans la nouvelle qui s'intitule «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown». Le récit d'esclave apparaît pendant la période de l'esclavage. Le statut non privilégié de ces auteurs et leur quête de liberté sont des éléments qui justifient l'écriture de la vie des esclaves comme moyen de propagande contre l'esclavage. Au-delà de leur dimension autobiographique ou historique, les récits d'esclave sont aussi des productions littéraires, ayant une esthétique qui permet d'apprécier l'Africanité. Dans «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown», la fiction se trouve dans les modes de perception et de représentation des ex-esclaves.

Mots-clés: Récit d'esclave, imagination littéraire, Africanité, Manichéisme, déterritorisation, subversion.

Introduction

It is interesting to analyze slave narratives and distinguish the part of fiction and history in these texts. Officially, slave narratives are considered as the first genre of literature in the African American community. But inside them, history and fiction are melted and intertwined. They as a matter of fact serve as ingredients in the making of this genre. Slave narratives are reliable documents to know about the past of slaves, as they are the first written texts that gave testimony to the living conditions and experiences endured by black people in America.

Most slave narratives are published in the era of slavery. Some were also written later on. «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» was first printed in

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1851, twelve years before the Emancipation Proclamation. Slave narratives were used by abolitionists for propaganda against the Peculiar Institution. In this campaign against slavery, the discourse in these narratives can appear somehow to be biased and motivated. They are intentional with the objective assigned to definitely put an end to slavery.

Intention derives from the abolitionist perspective rendered in these texts. It questions the veracity of facts, as to reveal their fictional dimension. In fact, the writing of slave narratives combines both objective and imaginative means. The association of historical data with imagination was on purpose used to reach the expected effect to raise people's awareness in order to make the end of slavery a national cause. Slave narratives as a political discourse significantly participated in the abolition of slavery in the United States of America.

The role that they played by bringing out the atrocities of slavery, gives them an historical relevance, since they contributed to the end of slavery. From a historiographical perspective, a relation of causality can be established between the publication of slave narratives and the abolition of slavery. The relationship of cause to effect only allows in the perception of facts to show that the abolition of slavery can be read as a consequence of the actions taken by abolitionists. Slave narratives gave voice to the slaves and echoed their cause beyond the borders of America, in England, where most of them were published.

Slave narratives are in fact not only the record of the experiences of slaves in written and oral forms, since most of them could not write. Their historical value is undeniable. They constitute real sources from which restitution of the past is made possible. By raising the awareness on mistreatment and dehumanization of black people, slave narratives are among the main anti-slavery texts of revolt in America. But this is not their only purpose. Beyond history, the writing of slave narratives also reveals the aesthetics of black people. Slave narratives are sources from which can be perceived black people's mode of perception and representation.

The aim of this article is to analyze the ambivalence between fiction and history in the assessment of slave narratives, the case study of «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown». As a written story - a construct, «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» yields an imagination that can be dissociated with the historical context. There is in this slave narrative the seed of a growing literature that we intend to show through biblical symbols.

To deal with the historical interpretation of literary texts, New historicism is here summoned to show how «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» is socially and culturally determined. This approach permits to read the part of fiction and non-fiction, necessary to reveal the stakes of history and the



aesthetic implications of the text studied.¹ It leads to a reexamination of homogeneity as it appears in the unity of culture and history in slave narratives.

1. Historical representations

Literary imagination is generated to some extent by history. It is based on the context of artistic forms. This element permits to recognize the period during which a given text is written. In other words, literary creation is the emanation of time. In the same vein, Terry Eagleton sees «forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history».² The awareness of time comes through history. Time is then an *apriori* to assess a given genre. Events of the past produce a type of literature with regard to the form of writing. Each historical context predetermines its own aesthetics, as slavery which lasted over three centuries gave birth to slave narratives. Among other texts of the same genre, «Narrative of the life of Henry Box Brown» illustrates the correlation between literary creation and history.

Firstly, a link can be established from a thematic point of view. Apart from being perceived as an economic system, slavery is also an institution which imposed its mode of perception and representation. The themes of liberty, exploitation, racism, etc., are central in all slave narratives.³ The Peculiar Institution was characterized by the exploitation of human beings used as animals in plantation fields. Slaves were exploited and treated as being inferior. This institution reinforced and justified racial difference to its extreme expression of racism.⁴ But it also contained the seeds of its own destruction. For, freedom is the aspiration for anyone kept in captivity. The recurrence and centrality of these three articulations actually define from a thematic perspective all slave narratives.

The materialistic conception which determines the production and reproduction of history can here be applied to the end of the era of slavery. The evolution of history is engendered by the opposition and contradiction within the system or the Institution of slavery. It has the following configurations – the master versus the slave, the North versus the South, as well as agriculture versus industrialization. In a dialectic, the slave was opposed to the master for his/her desire of liberty. The South which was agricultural, had a different

¹ M. A. R. Habib, (2008), *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present*. Oxford : Blackwell Publishing, pp. 761-762.

² Terry Eagleton, (1983), *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Methuen & CO LTD, p. 3.

³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Ed. (2002), « Introduction », in *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Signet Classics, p. 2.

⁴ Maurice Lengellé, (1962), *L'Esclavage*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 48-49.



economy, as compared to the industrialized North. The industrialization of the North was a subject of great stakes with the abolition of slavery.

Besides history, these contradictions and oppositions also allow the perpetuation of capitalism. As a subsequent event, the abolition of slavery was inscribed in the same ideological scheme, one which had somehow made possible the dialectic of the master and the slave. The freedom of slaves occurred in the reproduction of this system, since it has led to an identical configuration, the one which opposes the workers with those possessing the means of production.

In this reproduction of societal structures, ideology is used as a means to legitimate the power of the ruling class.⁵ The change of context did not in fact alter the ideological scheme of the ruling class. Slave narratives perceived as the manifestation of the reappropriation of the speech act by slaves within the system, represent a counter-narrative from the position of black people, be them free or not at the bottom of the social ladder. From the marginalized position of black people in either the industrialized North, or agricultural South, the content of slave narratives rather reveals their aspiration.

Yet, this counter-narrative gives another version of history, in which slaves talk about their own experiences. Slave narratives propose a different point of view. The title of most slave narratives is followed by the mention «Written by Himself» as in «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown». This insistence gives credibility to the nature of information delivered. It positions the slave no longer as an object as it has been institutionalized by slavery, but a subject who takes actions. Slave narratives are the expression of the coming emancipation of black people. In these texts which are essentially biographical or autobiographical as in the case study, the slave represented here by Henry Box Brown reappropriates his history, by assuming his words.

Slave narratives played a prominent role in black people's self-assertion as the first literary genre. Their characteristics reveal an historical dynamics. Subversion appears in writing. The quest of freedom, one of the main traits of slave narratives, is justified by the mistreatment and dehumanization of slaves. It characterizes and defines this genre. All slave narratives are essentially a discourse on the virtue of liberty. They are a denunciation of slavery, showing the itinerary – the aspiration of black people. The title of Booker T. Washington's text *Up From Slavery*⁶ shows an identical plot in every slave narrative. This actantial scheme is pretty much illustrated in «Narrative of the life of Henry Box Brown». The quest of liberty is indeed perceived in the historiography of African Americans.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, (1983), *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. London: Methuen & CO LTD, p. 5.

⁶ Booker T. Washington, (1967), *Up from Slavery*. New York : Airmont Books.



Themes cannot definitely be dissociated from their context, because they emerge from it. They are not literary production as such. They work as ingredients, in so far as literature is more concerned about the way they are presented and used. The treatment of historical facts in slave narratives has an impact on the assessment of the past, since another version of history comes out of the writing process. In other words, literature provides new insights on what is historical. And from this point of view, slave narratives can be to some extent considered as historical artifacts.

The thematic unit developed in slave narratives is all the more interesting as it shows timeline. Chronology in slave narratives embraces the period of slavery in southern states marked by the exploitation of humans reduced into slaves in plantations, and the industrialization of northern states which announced the abolition of slavery. The imagery in slave narratives is grounded on these two facts feeding Manichaeism from which is perceived the fictional dynamism of slave narratives.

Manichaeism appears in the setting, as it permits to read history. The structure of all slave narratives is built on a duality. On a horizontal axis, the North symbolizes freedom, whereas the South stands for slavery.⁷ On a vertical axis, a biblical imagery is juxtaposed to this representation. It evokes heaven and hell. This language is used to condemn slavery and incite slaves to flee to the North by any means necessary. The historical dialectic which accounts for the evolution of the status of Blacks from slave to free, describes the dynamics of slave narratives founded on Manichaeism.

In «Narrative of the life of Henry Box Brown», intertextuality is present in the representation of the box that the slave uses for his escape. The closed box that contains Henry is a parcel mailed to the North – Philadelphia particularly. The travel takes «twenty-seven hours [...], through a distance of three hundred and fifty miles» (p. 61). Henry finds himself locked in the darkness, squeezed like in a coffin with no space and no air enough to breathe. Distance and duration are the two elements that need to be considered to realize what this experience really was. In addition to space and air, Henry endures a descent to hell.

Religious symbolism in «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» contains an historical imagery. The box that Henry uses is metaphorically a tomb. This is the representation of the story of Lazarus in the Bible, who died and was resurrected by Jesus. Christian representations evoke the history of black people. «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» is a parody of the Bible. By putting himself in the box, Henry symbolically dies. The sacrificial

⁷ John Hope Franklin, (1984), *De l'esclavage à la liberté : Histoire des Afro-Américains*. Paris : Nouveaux Horizons, pp. 226-227.



dimension of this story shows the horror of this Institution. A parallel can here be done with the character of Sethe in *Beloved* considered as a neo-slave narrative, who decides to kill her children, refusing to let them go back at slavery.⁸

By accepting to get into the box, Henry figuratively accepts to die. He is brought back to life at his arrival, when he comes out of the box. The Judeo-Christian mode of perception defines Henry's deed as an act of emancipation, since it is assimilated with Jesus who transcended from death. Henry is now free. The biblical language in the mention of «my resurrection from the grave of slavery» (p. 62) emphasizes his change of status which goes with the possession of a new land.

Furthermore, the image of the box in «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» recalls the slave ships during the experience of the Middle Passage, as it deals with deterritorialization. This imagery gives an historical representation. During the Transatlantic voyage, Africans were captured and chained. They were put into boxes in the slave ships. Uprooted, they were brought to America, and turned into slaves. The confinement of the box illustrates the concept of deterritorialization. In the dynamics of the text, it appears as a reproduction of the Middle Passage in the form of an anticipation which foretells the new conditions of the free slave in the North. «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» is not only an autobiographical text. Its historical dimension is considerable to know the experience of black people in America.

By deconstructing Manichaeism in «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown», the anti-slavery cause remains the main motivation of the writing of slave narratives. They testify the horrors of slavery, as to put an end to this system of exploitation. By describing the North as a place of freedom, slave narratives have also contributed to the expansion of capitalism in America. «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» reveals some nuances, paradoxes, and contradictions in the discourse on emancipation. It especially points out the disguised ideology behind the abolition of slavery in the United States. It is established through the reproduction of the system of domination in which Blacks are used from their manpower. Beyond this link with the context, slave narratives are more subversive with the detachment that they operate with the discourse on history.

2. Imagination Transcending Historical Determinism

The imagery produced in slave narratives does not essentially derive from the historical context, even though slavery remains the main cause which has led to the writing of this genre. It is undeniable that it has determined its

⁸ Toni Morrison, (1987), *Beloved*. London : Vintage, p. 163.



production. In slave narratives, imagination can be dissociated from the historical context, because as an act of imitation writing is also subjective. Imitation and subjectivity are linked, since the failure of imitation can participate in subjectivity.⁹ Even unconsciously operated, a part of the narrator’s self subtly appears in writing.

Language carries a mode of perception which in turn reveals how the identity of the author comes in writing – an identity that is not exclusively the outcome of history. Initiating the story on page 15, the following utterances «I was born [...] in Louisa County, in 1815» and «I entered the world a slave» describe a state of self-consciousness. They relate the author’s condition as a slave and the fact to be born slave. Rebirth is signified with the figure of the mother through the passage from the bilges where captives were chained and caged to the American shores, where Africans lose the ownership of their own selves.¹⁰ The representation of pro-creation shows not only the beginning of the Peculiar Institution in the expression «enter[ing] into the world» (p. 15). But it also describes the way slavery operated, as it reads: «they robbed me of myself» (p. 15). Alienation is meant in the writing of «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» through dispossession.

Moreover, the second discourse is opposed to the first one, since it expresses strangeness due to the difference of perception on the representation of birth. «I entered the world» is a representation that derives from the violence of history. It illustrates uprootedness and the deportation of Africans in America. This representation reveals Black aesthetics, by underlining a pre-conscience. It tells black people’s cosmology in which the belief in the other world is nothing but the mark of the survival of the memory of Africa.¹¹ The writing of slave narratives contains the seeds of the African memory of black people after almost three centuries of slavery, systematic alienation, and brain wash.

There is in Henry Box Brown’s discourse in a disguised form the presence of a totemic system of representation and perception. The reference to nature is all the more interesting that it allows to understand not only the culture of black people, but also slavery as a system. The correlation between these elements is evidenced in the following passage:

[My mother] would take me upon her knee and, pointing to the forest trees which were then stripped of their foliage by the winds of autumn, would say to me, my

⁹ Gérard Genette, (1972), *Figures III*. Paris: Seuil, p. 186.

¹⁰ Ange Gaël Pambo Pambo N’diaye, (2011), *Le Réalisme magique dans les romans de Toni Morrison: La revendication d’une écriture noire*. Berlin: Editions Universitaires Européennes, pp. 115-116.

¹¹ Ousseynou B. Traoré, (1993), « Mythic Structures of Ethnic Memory in *Beloved: The Mammy Watta and Middle Passage Paradigms* », in « *Beloved, She’s Mine* »: *Essais sur Beloved de Toni Morrison*, réunis et présentés par Geneviève Fabre et Claudine Raynaud. Pais : Celanta, p. 80.



son, as yonder leaves are stripped from off the trees of the forest, so are the children of the slaves swept away from them by the hands of cruel tyrants. (p. 16).

From the slaves's perspective, the knowledge of the institution of slavery is built upon black people's mode of perception. The value given to nature displays the inscription of an external element – the change of weather – in their psyche. This interiorization reveals the totemic mode of representation, as they rely on nature to understand slavery.

The same dynamics is observed with another element of nature – the thunder. In fact, the totemic representation derives from the new meaning given to the thunder. Its symbolic signification is contextual. It is achieved at the time of slavery, as it is proven in the following passage of the text:

I really believed my old master was Almighty God, that the young master was Jesus Christ! The reason of this error seems to be the voice of God, and when it was about to thunder my old master would approach us, if we were in the yard, and say, all you children run into the house now, for it is going to thunder; and after the thunder storm was over he would approach us smilingly [...]. (p. 18).

In an associative way, the figure of God is represented by the character of the master. His voice is then God's voice. This systematic attribution permits to establish the sacred. In other words, this relation grants authority to the master. The thunder becomes a means to sustain sacredness in a system of beliefs founded on animism.¹² The thunder is the totem, since it is the materialization of the slaves's belief – «the voice of God». And as such in a totemic mode of representation, the thunder also functions as a taboo – from the role that it plays in the subjugation of black people. The writing of «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» reveals a syncretism of cultural beliefs.

The relation that links the former slave to the writing of slave narrative is complex. «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» is doubly articulated. In that sense, this slave narrative is used on the one hand as a means of expression for propaganda against slavery. Writing is based on denunciation. On the other hand, slave narratives could above all be considered as an outlet for slaves deprived of speech. From a linguistic perspective, the writing of slave narratives is first of all an act of reappropriation of language. Writing turns into a means of survival. Black people as it is the case of Henry Box Brown wrote slave narratives to keep the African memory, culture, and tradition alive.

There is a subversion of the ideology of domination in the writing of slave narratives. It is made through a difference of mode of perception and representation which reveals the black subject. In «Narrative of the life of Henry Box Brown», subversion occurs by questioning what appears to be a cultural syncretism. The deconstruction of religious representation as does Henry leads

¹² Sigmund Freud, (1965), *Totem et tabou: Interprétation par la psychanalyse de la vie sociale des peuples primitifs*, traduit de l'allemand par Serge Jankélévitch. Paris : Editions Payot, p. 108.



to his self-realization. The writing of slave narratives de-alienates the black subject.

Conclusion

The weight of history in «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» is undeniable. History constitutes an important material in the writing of this genre of literature. Even though essentially based on it, the treatment of history varies from the perspectives that slave narratives generally offer. The logic of binary opposition which sustains the historical articulation of slave narratives, is in fact rejected, limiting the possibilities of language. As shown in the case study, slave narratives are ideologically conflicted texts.

The dynamics of slave narratives does not derive from the opposition of races – Black versus White. It is not only restricted to the opposition of classes – slaves versus masters. Such configurations grant an historical dimension to slave narratives. Antagonism which serves the Marxist thought, is here the expression of a desire to historicize this genre of literature.

Besides, slave narratives rather contain other figures of paradox, contradiction, and even silence that participate in a plurality of voices. These figures are the way through which there is a detachment with history. Fictionalization occurs in slave narratives, particularly in «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» with the intregation of black people's mode of perception and representation. Since they are linked with culture and tradition, they reveal in the writing of «Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown» an aesthetics that evokes their Africanness. It contributes beyond the historical relevance of this text, to enrich its literary value.

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