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An African's Trouble with His Masters' Voices

Abstract

The Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw appropriates Evangelical discourse in order to establish Gronniosaw's moral authority, which is derived from Gronniosaw's submission to God, has to be authenticated by clerical authorities and allows him to criticize his corrupt masters. Gronniosaw exposes discrepancies between his masters' religious and economic discourses and practices less by direct argument than by the negating force of conspicuous silence, by repetitions of scenes of abuse and abject poverty and by the ironic plotment of his life. Being a good Christian alienates him from Western society and endangers his very survival in a commercial culture, which undermines the language of the spirit and compares unfavourably to the African subsistence economy.

why has the flood of criticism of slave narratives almost bypassed Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's autobiography of 1770? It seems that his decision to write a spiritual autobiography does not allow any space for individuality and African culture, so that the text does not respond to interests in the emancipation of Africans. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asks how an African can make a white text speak with a black voice (1988: 55). According to Gates, Gronniosaw overcomes the Bible's initial silence for the illiterate African by mastering reading and writing, which enables him to construct a self according to the Western tradition at the cost of his African culture and identity (1988: 62-63, 65). Gates argues that the act of writing repudiates the white Great Chain of Being, which places the

African at the level of animals, but insists that the black voice is absent in a language that posits "the irreducible element of cultural difference" (1988: 70) between white and black. Gates suggests, but does not perform, a dialogic reading of the text. Helen Thomas is much more aware of the dialogic potential of the slave narrative, which appropriates rather than assimilates Evangelical discourse, in which the dispossessed are empowered by the spirit and give voice to protest like Dissenters (2000: 167, 183, 188). Gronniosaw's narrative neither excludes a black perspective according to Gates nor "articulates an uninterrupted continuum of preslavery cultural identity and [...] ancestral spirits" according to Thomas (2000: 197). Instead, the black voice is not simply absent but asserted as a negative and negating presence that presents assimilation as alienation from African and Anglo-American cultures.

I would like to put forward three arguments concerning Gronniosaw's position in and between English discourses:

- (1) Gronniosaw reveals discrepancies between the voice of God and the voices of his masters. Foucault maintains that a discursive system determines who is entitled to speak with authority in which ways about what to whom (1991: 22-30). Authority is a thorny issue in Evangelicalism. Sac van Bercovitch points out that the Bible is the sole authority for the individual Puritan, who becomes his own exegete, a fact which sparked intrasectarian conflicts about the correct reading of the text (1975: 28). Authority is subject to negotiation in Gronniosaw's communication with God and his Christian masters.
- (2) None of the critics I am aware of takes full account of Gronniosaw's "digression" on African life, which juxtaposes the African subsistence economy and the Western capitalist economy.
- (3) Gronniosaw exposes discrepancies between his masters' religious and economic discourses. His marginal voice negotiates the conflict between religion and commerce, a core problem of British identity and international position in the eighteenth century (see Dabydeen 1985: 45).

According to his autobiography, Gronniosaw was a Prince of Bomo in what is today Northern Nigeria. The boy came with an ivory merchant to the Gold Coast, where he was sold into slavery. He was educated and converted by one of his masters, a Dutch Minister, in New York, who set him free upon his death. After doing several odd jobs in the American colonies, he enlisted with the British army, fought in Martinique and Cuba, and finally arrived in England in 1762-63. He married a poor English woman, who shared his struggle for survival. In about 1770, the aged immigrant published the story of his life. Gronniosaw came to the West at the time of the Great Awakening in North America in the first half of the eighteenth century (Ferguson 1994: 395) and the Evangelical Revival in England in the second half (Porter 1990: 308).

These movements share an antagonism towards moral corruption and materialism in a capitalist society, which threatens to displace God by money. Nobody seems better qualified to discuss the difficult relationship between God and Mammon than the Puritan businessman and bankrupt, Daniel Defoe. In 1707, Defoe praises, albeit with tongue in cheek, the power of money with allusions to Christ's miracles:

Well art thou called the god of this world [...] Thou makest homely things fair, old things young, crooked things straight; thou hast the great remedy of love, thou can'st give the blind an eye, the lame a leg, the fro ward a temper, and the scandalous a character. (1951: 131-32)

Defoe wavers between the definition of money as "the vehicle of Providence" (1951: 131) and as an agent of its own. He calls money a "necessary evil" that even its critics strive for - its legal possession, he maintains, "is the true foundation of order in the world"; money is "the mighty center of human action, the great rudder the world steers by, the vast hinge the globe turns on" (1951: 133). Gronniosaw, by contrast, forms a contrast between religion and money, but has to realize that he can hardly escape the rule of commerce.

In order to understand how Gronniosaw speaks about religion and the economy we have to discuss the question of authority and authorization. An instance of misappropriated authority in the story serves as a *mise en abyme* for Gronniosaw's autobiography. Gronniosaw, like Caliban, first learns to curse in the other language but contains his swearing after this experience: an old black slave warns him not to swear or he will be taken by the devil to burn in hell. Gronniosaw repeats this lesson to his swearing mistress, expressing his concern for her welfare. The old slave is severely punished and excluded from the company of the domestic slaves. Gronniosaw is left unharmed but decides to refrain from swearing in the future; whether from fear of punishment in this world or the next he does not say (2000 [1772]: 12-13). The black slave is not authorized to employ God's discourse in a way that gives him moral superiority over his secular master, but his masters violate Christian ethics by cursing and by punishing the moral agent. Gronniosaw tries not to antagonize his masters. He learns his lesson and refrains from commenting on his masters' behaviour, but the acute reader will perceive the implied value judgement on his masters. If Gates complains about Gronniosaw's acculturation, he ignores the strategic silence we have to pay close attention to. The scarcity of explicit interpretation draws our attention to repetitions, gaps, contradictions and arguments by plotment. Gronniosaw has a penchant for repetition with a difference. Thus, the scene discussed above is preceded by a similar situation in which he decides as a young boy to no longer openly question his tribe's faith because his father threatens to beat him. The Christian

masters teach the slaves not to turn their discourse against them as his father teaches him not to question the basic tenets of his culture. Since the impoverished African tells his story to a white amanuensis and addresses white readers who are steeped in Christianity and capitalism, we can hardly expect explicit criticism of their basic assumptions but have to look for implicit value judgements. The arbitrary or hostile reactions of masters towards the subaltern's questioning or appropriation of authority demand a reading for multiple meanings, which the authorizing preface attempts to contain.

In the preface to the slave narrative, the Methodist clergyman Walter Shirley suggests a strictly Evangelical interpretation of the text (see Thomas 2000: 193). Shirley stresses the providential design in Gronniosaw's life, and particularly his "saving Heart-Acquaintance and Union with the triune God in Christ reconciling the World unto himself; and not imputing their Trespasses" (2000 [1772]: 4). He characterizes the African as a patient Christian, who does not judge evil but endures it patiently: "he would rather embrace the Dung-hill, having Christ in his Heart, than give up his spiritual Possessions and Enjoyment, to fill the Throne of Princes" (4). The Methodist presents Gronniosaw as an object in a moral economy, in which Gronniosaw was purchased by the cross, is given a good character by "credible Persons," and is therefore entitled to the Christian reader's "charitable Regard" (4).

The heathen Africans pray to their gods in silence, which suggests that these gods do not "signify." The heathen boy, who has an inkling of one superior Being, is addressed by God in an inarticulate voice of thunder that paralyses the boy with fear. When Gronniosaw's first white master reads prayers from the Bible, he is amazed to see the book talk to the white man, and is very disappointed that the book does not speak to him when he puts his ears to it. Instead of attributing the silence to his ignorance of the other language, the boy thinks that the book despises his race. The young slave gradually acquires Dutch and English, improving his understanding of his white masters and the Bible, but he feels too wicked to follow Christ's call (11-16). The silent service under a palm tree in Africa is displaced by Gronniosaw's prayer to God under an oak tree in America. Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted* prepares him for God's answers to his prayers and his conversion experience: "I was so drawn out of myself, and so fill'd and awed by the Presence of God that I saw (or thought I saw) light inexpressible dart from heaven upon me" (17). The awesome spiritual displacement of the self by God reminds us of the displacement of the slave's legal and social person by the master who possesses him. But Gronniosaw puts himself implicitly above his worldly masters, echoing Baxter: "I blest God for my poverty, that I had no worldly riches or grandeur to draw my heart from Him" (18; cf Baxter 1995 [1657]: 14, 104). In accord with Baxter, Gronniosaw would like to turn

away from this world, but secular concerns force him to return to worldly affairs in order to survive. In spite of his covenant with the ultimate authority, Gronniosaw is aware of the fact that his illumination "will not gain credit with many" because the mystical experience "cannot be expressed and only conceived by those who have experienced the like" (17). Gronniosaw qualifies as a member of the elect but knows that worldly masters have to authorize the spiritual elevation of the African. After his master's death and his manumission, Gronniosaw follows his late master's voice, travels to the Netherlands, and is accredited by Dutch Calvinist ministers, to whom he successfully relates his experience, being inspired by God's words: "they were all very well satisfied, and persuaded I was what I pretended to be" (26). His credit as a Christian, however, does not bring him worldly credit or money. On the contrary, Gronniosaw's appropriation of Baxter's Puritan discourse and its deprecation of the pursuit of wealth increases his alienation from worldly society. It would be wrong, however, merely to relate Gronniosaw's attitude towards money to his assimilation into Puritanism because it goes back to the subsistence economy of his home country.

In Africa, the author maintains, the palm tree provides food, drink and clothing to the people (6). John Locke would have compared these Africans to early human beings, who "contented themselves with what un-assisted Nature offered to their Necessities" (1988 [1690]: 299); everyone had a right to take as much as he could use (298). Locke distinguishes the truly useful but perishable things men need for the support of their lives from gold, which "has its value only from the consent of Men" (301). The difference between the African subsistence economy and the Western capitalist economy is crucial to an understanding of Gronniosaw's attitude towards money and Western slavery. His path into slavery is quite unusual. The boy leaves home on a spiritual quest prompted by his discontent with the heathen faith in order to become acquainted with white people. The king of the Gold Coast mistakes him for a spy, sentences him to death, but then pardons him on condition that he be sold into slavery. Gronniosaw becomes desperate to exchange his social death as a slave for his real death because nobody wants to buy the boy who is too small. It is not his value as a slave that makes a Dutch captain buy him "for two yards of check" (2000 [1772]: 11). He appeals in his own language to a Dutch captain, "father, save me" (11), which, of course, the Dutchman cannot understand but God must have heard. Gronniosaw takes recourse to God's intervention to explain the bargain in one line, but explains in seven lines how "large [a] quantity of gold" (11) he had in rings and chains, which he gladly parted with. Henry Louis Gates maintains that Gronniosaw betrays his African heritage by willingly exchanging his chain of gold for a set of Western clothes (1988: 61). But Gronniosaw symbolically exchanges the gold, which

was of no use to him, for his life, which seems to have been of no use to the trader. By expressing his disregard for the gold, which enriched the slaver, he points out the difference between the heathen and the "serious" (11) Christian, who profits from the slave trade. In view of the narrator's Puritan aversion to wealth, the adjective "serious" for the Christian takes on an ironic hue. If the value of gold or money, according to Locke, depends upon the consent of men, Gronniosaw clearly refuses to acknowledge its value. Gold had been the fundamental value of the Anglo-American economies since the mercantile nations used it to guarantee their currency and based the estimate of their power on bullion. We can read Gronniosaw's belittlement of gold as an implicit subversion of what Defoe calls "the true foundation of order in the world" (1951: 133). However, the scene shows that Gronniosaw cannot have access to Christianity without being submitted to the rules of commerce. As a slave, Gronniosaw suffers from spiritual setbacks, but as a free man, he tends to suffer from worldly needs. But Gronniosaw insists how important freedom is to him: he repeats three times in four lines that his master left him his freedom on his deathbed (18). His silence on the evils of slavery and his interpretation of his abuse and mistreatment as a free African as divine tribulations must not be misunderstood as a plea for benevolent patriarchal slavery but should be seen as a concession to his former masters and to Christian readers. The emplotment of his story suggests an ironic reversal of situations: Africa is marked by spiritual poverty and economic welfare; North America and England are rich but driven by spiritual and economic "warfare." Gronniosaw is well-off but discontented in Africa, poor and full of spiritual doubts in America, and destitute but firm in faith in England.

Disappointed with the spiritual wilderness in North America, Gronniosaw embarks for England in order to be among Christians and escape "cruelty or ingratitude" (22). However, his chosen land turns out to be the dung-hill mentioned in the preface, a place of sin that is "worse than Sodom (considering the great advantages they have)" (23). His life in England becomes an alternating series of destitution and relief reaching him through Evangelical worthies, thanks to God's intervention.

The African and his family are threatened with eviction, and are forced to pawn their clothes and sell their bed for want of money to buy food. Gronniosaw dwells extensively on a situation where the starving family was glad to survive upon one raw carrot (29) a day. Their lack of shelter, clothing and food is explained as a test of his faith, but also compares unfavourably with the ease of natural subsistence in Africa. Gronniosaw does not need to tell us explicitly that the misery he suffers gives the lie to the superiority of a capitalist economy over a subsistence economy. Gronniosaw and his wife appear to be willing and able to work hard, but nevertheless are victims of unemploy-

ment and cutthroat competition among workers. However, Gronniosaw refrains from joining the labourers in their struggle for higher wages because he leaves justice up to God and does not belong to the English. Time and again, the family depends on the private charity of Christians, because Gronniosaw as an immigrant is not entitled to charity from a parish. The moral economy of charity makes up for the deficiency of the moneyed economy. The English moral economy, however, not only complements capitalism but is based upon capitalism, which generates profits that to some extent are redistributed by charity and maintains the worldly hierarchy between haves and have-nots. Gronniosaw himself donates all the money he does not need for his bare survival to those in need. Again, he does not act according to capitalist rules or even those of prudence, but follows Baxter's strict appeal not to pursue worldly wealth as well as the rules of subsistence economy. Giving alms without regard to himself, Gronniosaw time and again is in need of charity himself and never rises above others: his Christian selflessness leads to financial ruin, which in turn forces him to pay more attention to worldly concerns in order to survive.

Nevertheless, he seems to be content with his lot: "I am willing, and even desirous to be counted as nothing, a stranger in the world, and a pilgrim here" (25-26). He became a non-person as a slave and was treated as a nobody in England and America due to his race and his poverty: he is nothing and he has "nothing" (33). The Christian nothing, however, is completed by God. Gronniosaw hopes, in agreement with Baxter, that his worldly losses will be made up by God: "I am not without hope that they [the trials and troubles] have been all sanctified to me" (26): i.e., rendered spiritually profitable to him. The writer follows Baxter in his credit of God's word instead of credit in this world (Baxter 1995 [1657]: 60, 140). He hopes for a good return on his investment and the maximum profit of eternal salvation for temporal humiliation. Barely able to survive in England, the African immigrant desires his release from the diaspora:

As Pilgrims, and very poor Pilgrims, we are travelling through many diffi-culties towards our HEAVENLY HOME, and waiting patiently for his gracious call, when the Lord shall deliver us out of the evils of this present world and bring us to the EVERLASTING GLORIES of the world to come. (2000 [1772]: 33-34)

If we consider that he came to England as his chosen land, this final sentence of his autobiography expresses his utter disillusionment with the country. Gronniosaw would be a prime example of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic culture as an everlasting journey in diaspora.

In the end, the moral and the monetary economies meet: Gronniosaw's ethics pay in this world, because he can sell his autobiography. The spiritual autobiography can be read as an investment that pays moral interest by edifying readers, or as paper-credit in a moral economy in which, for once, morals raise money, and the donors may pay for their 'credit' in the world beyond. The fact that Gronniosaw sells best as "nothing" recalls Defoe's glorification of credit as a "substantial non-entity" that transforms nothing into something, paper into money (1951: 116-18). In an economic era that depended heavily on growing credit transactions and in which "all forms of credit-worthy paper - even lottery tickets - tended to become negotiable and pass into circulation" (Porter 1990: 188), a creditable spiritual autobiography was a "good" investment.

Gronniosaw's deprecation of wealth and his charitable dispensation of surplus can be traced back to Puritanism as well as to an African subsistence economy. Gronniosaw is doubly inscribed as nothing, because he yields his self in Christian terms and owns nothing in economic terms. By embracing nothing as his identity, the African refuses to follow the rules of Western society and capitalism and is entitled to charity, an exchange of something for nothing. The politics of Puritan discourse makes him trust in divine rather than worldly justice and enable him to raise his voice in protest against wealth and capitalism. Thus, the African is not simply absent from his text, as Gates maintains, but voices his conspicuous silent protest by gaps, contradictions and emplotment against hypocritical Christian capitalists who retrieve gold and slaves from the colonies in the service of Mammon. Gronniosaw's discourse of negation prefigures Friday's more radical resistance to interaction and involvement with the English in Coetzee's *Foe*. At the end of the novel, Friday, who seems to be autistic, puts on Foe's robe and wig and writes "rows and rows of the letter o" (1986: 152).

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