

Ideological Tensions in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

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In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation.

E. Said. *Orientalism*.

Perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of the beginning of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is the candidness with which the narrator separates the Europeans' conception of the Indians from their conception of Negroes. The British, we read, live with the natives of Surinam "in perfect Amity, without daring to command 'em; but, on the contrary, caress 'em with all the brotherly and friendly Affection in the World" (1-2). The Caribbs, we learn, are some kind of benign Calibans who are extremely useful to the Europeans on the island: "So that they being on all occasions very useful to us, we find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as Friends, and not to treat 'em as Slaves, not dare we do other, their numbers so far surpassing ours in that Continent" (5). "Those then who we make use of to work", the narrator clarifies immediately, "are Negroes, Black Slaves" (5). The term "Negro", which as Jordan explains was incorporated into English from the Hispanic languages in mid-sixteenth century (Jordan, 1968, 61), comes to express in Behn's equation the condition of the Africans as Black slaves.

Although the Indians participate in the quality of the alien and the different, they are automatically included in Behn's words in the discourse of the Noble Savage, a category which from the sixteenth century onwards reminded Europeans of the need to return to simpler ways of life (White, 1990, 172). With their natural nobility, the Indians had created what has been interpreted by the critics as the literal realization of the Golden Age myth (Weston, 1984, 65), as we can read in the first pages of the novel: "And these People represented to me an absolute Idea of the first State of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin" (3). Indians and Blacks share residual forms of wildness in the novel—both threaten to rise against the Europeans, both are part of that partly "unknown" and therefore potentially dangerous continent (Cf. Azim, 1994, 47)—, but whereas the Indians are viewed as benign representations of the wild man of the Middle Ages, the African slaves retain that source of malignity which explained their ineradicable wildness. There were, as Winthrop Jordan explains in *White over Black*, several reasons for the confinement of Blacks within the category of the wild man. From the different accounts of travellers in Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Negro, as Jordan writes, "was not customarily thought of as embodying the qualities of the Noble Savage" (1968, 27). The cannibalism, the revolting diet, the defective religion, the savage behavior, the concupiscence and their skin color placed the Negro

among the beasts (Jordan, 1968, 28) and he was treated accordingly. As wild men, Negroes possessed the soul of an animal, and since man could do with animals what he would, domesticate them, use them or destroy them without sin, it was believed that “if that was the fate of animals, then wild men, men possessed of animal souls, had to be treated by normal men in similar ways” (White, 1990, 164). These traits made the Africans unworthy of the status of primitive nobility attained by the Indians, and at the same time conditioned their suitability for slavery according to the increasing necessities of the New World.

This division between the Indians as representatives of the Noble Savage and Negroes as the embodiments of the wild man seems to blur, however, in Behn’s *Oroonoko*. Behn transgresses these two categories through the inclusion in the realm of the noble savage of a unique black character, Oroonoko, thus creating the tradition of the Noble Negro (Sypher, 1969, 108). In so doing, Behn manages to “lift” the character from the black stereotype and make him the noble and gallant protagonist of the story. Behn creates a new textual space to render the real –if unknown– qualities of the black character. But this pioneering inclusion of the black character in the white text proves to be a risky if not impossible venture which creates irreconcilable tensions in the authorial voice, as critics such as Fogarty and Azim have noticed. What follows is an attempt at suggesting some of the omissions and absences in the creation of Oroonoko, which determine the narrator’s failure in the representation of the character.

Oroonoko, like Shakespeare’s Othello, has a distinctive trajectory in the novel. Like Shakespeare’s “Noble Moor”, Oroonoko moves from being a colonial subject who seems to have internalized the ideology of the dominant culture (he, like the English, the French, the Portuguese and the Spaniards traded with slaves; like the Europeans he emulates, he is a model of gallantry and courtly behavior), towards marginalization, towards a position as outcast (from the European community and from the text itself). From being part of the hegemonic society Oroonoko comes to occupy his position as “alter”. White society, in turn, becomes the real “other” for Oroonoko. Although the narrator erases in the description of her character the barbarity traditionally associated with the Negro, towards the end of the novel, however, she emphasizes those features of the Negro, his possessiveness, his wildness, that cause his fall. From her complex position as a voice rooted in the hegemonic European society and culture but fascinated with the exotic and the details of savage life which occurred in the world overseas (Cf. Azim, 1993, 35 & Jordan, 1968, 25), the narrator seems unable to follow a character who finally rebels against the principles she represents and against the way he has been translated in the white text.

The conditions of inclusion –or visibility– of the black character in the white text are explicit in Behn’s description of Oroonoko: “He was adorned with a native Beauty, so transcending all those of his gloomy Race, that he struck an Awe and Reverence, even into those that knew not his Quality” (6). The narrator intends to deconstruct the myth of blackness in Oroonoko only to reconstruct it when talking about the rest of that “gloomy race.” When the narrator proceeds with a close description of Oroonoko we find how Oroonoko’s Africanness is tamed in order to make him suitable for a white text:

The most famous statuary cou’d not form the figure of a Man more admirably turn’d from head to foot. His Face was not of brown rusty Black which most of that nation are, but of perfect Ebony, or polished Jett. His eyes were the most awful that cou’d be seen, and very piercing; the White of em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His Nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His Mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn’d Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and Art of his Face was so nobly and exactly form’d, that bating his color, there could be nothing in Nature most beautiful, agreeable and handsome.

There was no one Grace wanting, that bears the Standard of true Beauty. His Hair came down to his Shoulders, by the Aids of Art, which was by pulling it out with a Quill, and keeping it combed; of which he took particular care (8).

As we see in the narrator's description of Oroonoko, the Negro can only "attain savage nobility only by approximating (as best he could) the appearance of a white man" (Jordan 28), that is, we could add, by not being a Negro. The narrator singles out Oroonoko from the rest of the race, erases in the description of the character the traits which in the Europeans' eyes would make him "inferior," and rearranges the most traditional facial traits of the Negro, the nose and the lips. Although as an 18th-century traveller noted, thick lips and broad nostrils were considered "the beauties of the country" (Qted. in Jordan, 1968, 10), these were precisely some of the features which, according to some of the pro-slavery theoreticians, evidenced the inferiority of the black race, since they explained the fact that a Negro face could not express the same emotional feelings peculiar to the Caucasian. Oroonoko's hair, far from being the woolly hair peculiar to the African and which for these pro-slavery writers was a symbol of the Negro's inferiority, "comes down to his shoulders" and is made to imitate Caucasian hair. There is, as we see, one Eurocentric standard of beauty in the novel, to which Oroonoko has to accommodate: "There was no one grace wanting, that bears the standard of true beauty". For the narrator Oroonoko's color was the only impediment which prevented him from being the most beautiful, agreeable and handsome man. The narrator's standard of beauty, however, contrasts with the blackness which, as Sir John Mandeville explains, constitutes the African's sense of fairness. We read in Mandeville's *Travels* how the Egyptians "are black in colour, and they consider that a great beauty, and the blacker they are the fairer they seem to each other. And they say that if they were to paint an angel and a devil, they would paint the angel black and the devil white" (1983, 64). In Behn's text, Oroonoko enjoys, paraphrasing from Thomas Jefferson, "the fine mixtures of red and white" (since he is able to blush 16), "flowing hair" and "the elegant symmetry of form" peculiar to the whites, as opposed to the other blacks, who remain under "that immoveable veil of black" (Qted. by Sypher, 1969, 49), which the narrator refuses to remove. In Oroonoko's case, however, the narrator has lifted the veil of blackness to present the reader with a "washed Ethiop", to paraphrase from the popular saying "to wash an Ethiop White".

The whitening of Oroonoko is plain as well in the narrator's description of his manners and education. The narrator, as Sypher remarks, does not admire Oroonoko's innate Africanness but the "greatness of soul, those refined Notions of true Honour, that Absolute Generosity, and that Softness that was capable of the highest Passions of Love and Gallantry" (7), that is, those qualities of mind which had been infused in the young prince by his French tutor. Culture and manners, as we can infer from the text, are strictly European. Interestingly enough, we notice how the narrator has dissociated Oroonoko from the sexual traditions of his kingdom. Oroonoko is monogamous, totally dedicated to his beloved Imoinda, and has separated himself from the libidinous tendencies of his race. There is perhaps one word which refers to Oroonoko's innate features, Barbarity, which, as we read, has been uprooted by his European mentor: "He had nothing of Barbarity in his Nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his Education had been in some European Court" (7). There is nothing in the text to record an alternative culture. African culture is, to put it in Bhabha's words, the "stressed absence" (198) in the text. Africans, we would have to infer from the text, have no culture worth recording apart from what they get and imitate from European culture. Like the Indians whom the narrator describes in the text, Africans appear as *tabulae rasae* ready to receive the imprint of the white man. Europeans, like dedicated Prosperos, seem to carry out their almost "pro-

vidential” role of imposing a superior culture on both Indians and Africans, given their natural propensity to embrace extravagant fictions and religions: “I soon perceived,” writes the narrator, “by an admiration that is natural to these People [the Indians], and by the extreme Ignorance and Simplicity o’em, it were not difficult to establish unknown or extravagant Religion among them, and to impose any Notion or Fictions upon ‘em” (56).

We see how in deconstructing the black stereotype the narrator has made a case for Oroonoko and proved that he is not a creature beyond the realm of grace and society (Cf. Barthelemy, 1987, 6), that he is not all strangeness and foreignness, but that within the Chain of Being he is close to Europeans. In smoothing over the differences which separate Oroonoko from the Europeans, however, the narrator has re-constructed the myth of blackness, which determines the nature of the rest of the Africans who belong to what the narrator terms “that gloomy race”. Behn’s account illustrates the difficulties in discerning when the authorial voice is advocating or rejecting cultural stereotypes. As Barthelemy explains, there are black characters during the sixteenth and seventeenth century who, like Oroonoko, show that virtue stood not completely out of their reach. However, this conversion to civilization reveals rather that “by demonstrating virtue, these few honest Moors offer further validation of the more common, harmful and denigrating representations of black Moors because they [as individuals] prove that it is possible to resist the call of evil, though most unusual” (Barthelemy, 1987, 147).

But if in order to portray Oroonoko as the Noble Negro the narrator has to distort his physical traits and the aspects of his character which would be disturbing to the white audience, the authorial voice appears no less selective when it comes to the description of slavery in the Caribbean colony of Surinam. Oroonoko was already familiar with slavery, knew the practices of European traders, and frequently sold to them the slaves he took in battle. The institution of slavery was well known and widely practiced in Africa. But these slaves were war captives and if we give credit to Olaudah Equiano, an African who was abducted from his home and later sold into slavery, the condition of the slaves in Africa was very different from that of the slaves in the West Indies: “With us,” explains Equiano, “they do no more work than other members of the community, than even their master; their food, clothing, and lodging, were nearly the same as theirs, except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were free-born” (1986, 19). In fact, Oroonoko’s enslavement comes about because of his friendship with the master of an English ship, with whom he had frequently traded with slaves. Under the pretense of inviting Oroonoko and a hundred of the noblest youths of the court, the English master betrays Oroonoko and the rest of the Africans into slavery. Oroonoko is fettered and put like a “common” slave in a lot, we learn, “with seventeen more [slaves] of all sorts and sizes, but not one of Quality within him” (37). Once more the narrator singles out the character to emphasize the indignity of being among common slaves, but remains blind to the slaves’ plight, and openly accepts the institution of slavery (Hayden, 1980-81, 405). Her compromise with the European minority becomes clear when she briefly explains the way the slave traders put the slaves in different lots, “not daring to trust ‘em together, lest Rage and Courage should put ‘em upon contriving some great Action, to the Ruin of the Colony” (37). The separation of slaves was the most usual means for slave traders to break familial and tribal ties among the slaves. In this way, the slave traders made sure the slaves could hardly communicate with each other, thus fragmenting common history, common culture and common memory. The perspective of this ethnocentric narrator contrasts sharply with Olaudah Equiano’s memoirs and his view of the separation of slaves: “In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remem-

ber in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the man's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving in this occasion to see their distress and hear their cries at parting" (1986, 38). As opposed to Equiano's account, the narrator subdues the slave's perspective only to show her own concern with the safety of the colony.

The narrator's white perspective is equally manifest in the way she dismisses Oroonoko's African name: "I ought to tell you, that the Christians never buy any slaves but they give 'em some Name of their own, their native ones being likely very Barbarous and hard to pronounce, so that Mr. Trefry gave Oroonoko that of Caesar" (40). As we can see, the inclusion of Oroonoko in the white text implies his exclusion as African. In rejecting Oroonoko's "barbarous" name, Trefry, Oroonoko's master, manages to erase the African's past. He becomes *tabula rasa*, ready to be reborn in the white community with a new name. This new name, Caesar, imposes upon the black character the quintessential Western culture and gives him, in a way, a new past. Far from the naive act of re-naming which the narrator describes, by naming Oroonoko, Trefry—as namer—takes possession of the named and fixes him "as irreversibly other" (Benston, 1984, 152). The white perspective is equally identifiable when the narrator describes the civility with which Trefry treats Imoinda, whom he happened to purchase after she was sold into slavery by Oroonoko's grand-father. As he listens to Trefry and his infatuation with his beautiful slave, Oroonoko wonders at Trefry's restraint and cannot understand why Trefry, being the master, does not oblige his slave to yield, as was usual. Trefry's words ("She disarms me with that Modesty and weeping ...") sound indeed too idyllic to benefit plantation life and the sexual exploitation of female slaves by their masters in order to increase the slave population.

Notwithstanding the idealized atmosphere of the plantation and the fact that Surinam and the soft and easy fetters of slavery provide the setting for the union of Oroonoko and Imoinda, Oroonoko becomes restless about their condition as slaves. Especially so when Imoinda "conceived with Child," since the children follow the lot of the parents. Oroonoko tries to buy his freedom and in order to carry out this peculiar transaction which would give him back the possession of himself, paradoxically, offers Trefry "either gold, or a vast quantity of slaves" (45). We find no authorial comment about this equation of slaves and gold, nor about the fact that an African slave intends to be free through the enslavement of more Africans. Ironically, shortly after Oroonoko offers Trefry a vast number of slaves to purchase his freedom, there spreads throughout the English colony the fear that Oroonoko, aided by three hundred African slaves, was preparing a slave revolt. Once more, the authorial perspective, as part of the European minority threatened by the overwhelming number of black slaves, is clear in her description of uprisings as "ill Examples [which] have very fatal consequences often times, in many colonies" (63). No analysis of the real causes of slave revolts appears in the text, only the common view among Europeans that a successful insurrection would mean "an appalling world turned upside down, a crazy nonsense world of black over white, an anti-community which was the direct negation of community as white men knew it" (Jordan, 1968, 114).

Fearing a violent outbreak, the narrator is chosen to pacify Oroonoko by inculcating in Imoinda and Oroonoko further aspects of Western civilization: "I entertained them with the Loves of the *Romans*, and great Men, which charmed him to my Company; and her, with teaching stories of Nuns, and endeavouring to bring her to the knowledge of the true God" (46). Oroonoko's nature, however, is not completely "tamable" and the narrator's words cannot prevent the uprising. Paradoxically, Oroonoko forgets his past as slave-holder and makes a harangue to his fellow slaves about the miseries and ignominies of sla-

very (60). If the whites were the representatives of the superior culture Oroonoko imitated in the past, in his words to the rest of the slaves the Europeans are no more than something below the wildest savages, they are just a degenerate race who knows no human virtue. After the uprising failed, Oroonoko, who was promised freedom, was whipped “like a common slave” (68). He confirms his suspicions about the white man’s treachery and, like a deceived Caliban, only harbours revenge. The wildness which was silenced and erased throughout the text finally comes to the foreground, as if that alleged “perverse nature of the Negro,” which was supposed to break out at one point or another, had finally erupted (Bosman qtd. in Jordan, 1968, 26). The noble savage in Behn’s text thus turns into a wild man. From the European perspective the wildness manifests itself in Oroonoko’s design, which would start with the killing of Imoinda—and their unborn child—, of their enemies, and of himself. But this act of savagery or wildness can be viewed as well as an act of re-possession of his wife, of their child and of himself, as an effort to reclaim everything they had lost to slavery. Oroonoko’s killing of Imoinda is not only a monstrous act, as the Europeans would think, but also the only way to be sent back to their country, for that, as the narrator explains, “was their notion of the Next World” (72).

In order to effect this re-possession of the self, however, Oroonoko has to turn away from the image of the Noble Savage—which the narrator was trying to inscribe in the text— and return to the image of the wild man, that latent essence which the narrator attempted to eradicate. As opposed to the gallant and courtly gentleman Behn describes in the first pages of the novel, Oroonoko now turns into a mad Moor like Othello, a monster who has murdered his wife (74). When Oroonoko’s European traits of beauty disappear, only those traits which reveal him as an African remain: “he was now so altered, that his Face was like a Death’s-Head black’d over, nothing but Teeth and Eye-holes” (76). Thus transformed into the opposite of her topic, the narrator abandons Oroonoko as if she had assumed her failure in the inscription of her character: “His discourse was sad; and the earthy smell about him so strong, that I was persuaded to leave the place for some time, (being myself but sickly, and very apt to fall into Fits of dangerous Illness upon any extraordinary Melancholy)” (76). The narrator dissociates herself from her character unable to maintain the tensions she had wrought throughout the story: her ethnocentric perspective and her desire to talk about “the other”; her intention to create a noble savage out of a wild man; her construction of a myth of blackness as she deconstructs the Negro stereotype in Oroonoko; her compromise with a civilization which is able to transform noble savages into wild men. The silences that go into the creation of Caesar out of Oroonoko are finally more powerful than the narrator’s words and seem to oust the narrator, who, as we see, leaves the scene. At the same time that the black subject is inscribed in the white text, he is simultaneously being excluded as “the other.” Behn’s narration is inclusive, but this attempt at including the black character only produces a marginal figure. Oroonoko fails to be successfully portrayed in Behn’s novel not because he had the misfortune to “fall in an obscure world, that afforded only a Female Pen to celebrate his Fame” (40), nor because he was worthy of “a more sublime wit”, as the narrator explains, but because in the midst of all these tensions the African slave evades the representational form.

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