

Notes and Documents

The Case of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave

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EVERY schoolboy knows, even if in sketchy outlines, the political history of the conflict over slavery. Accounts of the slave trade abound, and a beginning has been made in the study of plantation society. But scholars and historians have until recently virtually neglected the life and behavior of one important segment of that society—the slave himself. All too often the discussion of slavery has been carried on in terms of stereotypes about the Negro slave that had no existence outside of the minds of white men.

What did it mean to be a slave, to be a marketable chattel, to suffer inescapable caste status, to work without wages, to be driven often without mercy and forced to accept the appearance, the idea of inferiority? How did it feel? What hopes and fears stirred in the minds of these illiterate and brutalized men? What feelings lay behind their murderous and abortive revolts? When they were forced into submission and disingenuous cooperation what was the nature of their tenuous “adjustment” to slavery? Or having fled the plantation, what had slavery done to their personality and behavior? These are questions that only the slave himself could directly answer. To discover the answers to them is to see in human terms what slavery entailed. Happily, there are many biographies and autobiographies of slaves extant.¹ These accounts, (called “slave narratives”) whether dictated, ghosted or written by the subjects themselves, are noteworthy for the facts they reveal in regard to both the plantation system and the personalities of the slaves molded by the system.

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¹ For studies of the slave narrative see: Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America* (New York, 1931); Marion W. Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1946; Charles H. Nichols, *A Study of the Slave Narrative*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, 1948.

Slave narratives are usually associated with the abolitionist movement which reached its most militant stage after 1831. There is no doubt that most of these late writings were produced with the aid of the anti-slavery men of Boston and New York, and thus contain literary, ethical, philosophical, and didactic elements added by the white ghost-writers. *The Narrative of James Williams* (1838) was dictated by the subject to John G. Whittier, *The Life of Josiah Henson* (1849) "narrated" to Samuel Eliot. William Wells Brown, J. W. C. Pennington, Henry Bibb and Frederick Douglass—all prominent in the anti-slavery cause—are but a few of the escaped slaves whose accounts were published in this period. Their autobiographies went into several editions and had large printings.

It is not very generally known, however, that slave narratives appeared in America in colonial times and in our early national period. Accounts written before 1831, though frequently dictated, show fewer evidences of abolitionist tampering, a less sentimental and propagandistic tone and, in general, a less careful editing and printing. Like all autobiographies they must be critically evaluated by the accepted rules for historical evidence, but nevertheless they provide a unique and an essential perspective on early American slavery. Such narratives began in 1703 with John Saffin's *Adam Negro's Tryall*, written in answer to Samuel Sewall's well known anti-slavery tract, *The Selling of Joseph*. Other eighteenth-century works include *The Address of Abraham Johnstone*, who was hanged at Woodbury, New Jersey for the murder of another Negro; *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (Boston, 1760); the broadside entitled *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur*, published in Boston in 1768; *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (London, 1785); *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (London, 1789), and *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa* (New London, 1798).

Among the most interesting of the early narratives is the *Life of William Grimes, The Runaway Slave* who escaped from slavery in 1814. Having gained the rudiments of an education after his escape, Grimes wrote the story of his life and published it in a 68-page pamphlet in 1825. By so doing he placed himself among the earliest of the nineteenth-century narrators who told of the outrage he suffered in slavery. *The Life of William Grimes* was, in this writer's judgment, clearly written by himself, not only because the style is simple, direct and unadorned, the text full

of misspelling and poor punctuation, but because the tone of the narrative is so personal and so protestant.

In calling attention to the story of William Grimes it is not contended that his was the typical experience and behavior of all slaves. A perusal of slave literature makes clear that there was a great variety of reactions on the part of the enslaved—from submissive cooperation to open rebellion. The narratives show, however, that while many slaves who were well-treated tended to be loyal to their masters many of the field hands, who suffered more, rebelled. Grimes is an example of the latter group.

Laziness, malingering, sabotage, strikes, flight, self-mutilation were common indices of the rebellious Negroes' unwillingness to "adjust" to their situation. The treatment accorded them caused an emotional instability and persistent feelings of fear, hate, aggression and guilt. Although the slaveholder usually succeeded in frustrating these slaves' physical efforts to escape, the result was a disorganized and unsettled personality. There is little doubt that in some chattels this psychological injury was permanent. Fully aware of the wrongs committed against them, many still suffered feelings of guilt even in the act of rebelling, for fear lay behind their aggression. The conflicts of personality which thus developed can be better understood as the behavior of a particular slave such as William Grimes is closely scrutinized. His might be considered typical of the rebellious pattern of behavior. There are notable exceptions, but in general, such slaves were poorly integrated persons—permanently damaged souls. Grimes never achieved a well-balanced, "adjusted" life even in freedom.

While analyzing the behavior of the Negro slave it is important to bear in mind the enormous limitations placed upon him. The lower caste had its attitudes, its ideals, and its aspirations determined for it by the superordinate group who were, of course, its models. The Negro observed his master's freedom of movement, the security of his master's family, the white man's refusal to permit personal affront and so on. But being a Negro meant "not only living in the presence of severe physical limitations, but, more important for personality development, also . . . living in an intimate culture *whose incentives, rewards and punishments prevent[ed] the development of that type of personal standards, attitudes and habits which the general community . . . [deemed] desirable.*"² Hence in at-

² Quoted from American Youth Commission (Owen D. Young, chairman), First Report on Personality Development of Negro Youth, by Dorothy Canfield Fisher in Introduction to Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1940), ix-x.

tempting to live up to the ideals of the dominant group the slave was consistently frustrated. In the light of this conflict, the many stratagems and deceitful methods employed by the subordinate group seemed vital to their survival. A human being subjected to the denial of all that the community around him valued not unnaturally became sullen, resentful and emotionally unstable.

The story which William Grimes tells of his life illustrates well the effect of caste status, deprivation and physical suffering on a personality. Born in 1784 in King George County, Virginia, William Grimes was the son of "one of the most wealthy planters in Virginia."³ Old Grimes was a wild sort of man who murdered a neighboring planter, was tried, and was acquitted on grounds of insanity. He died early in William's life, and his half-white son became the property of another planter. In his early years Grimes' masters were not unkind, but when he was old enough to work in the fields he was often whipped and cruelly driven by black and white overseers. One white overseer, as Grimes told it,

set us to making fence, and would compel us to *run* with the rails on our backs, whipping us all the time most unmercifully. This hard treatment continuing for some time I at length resolved to run away.⁴

After Grimes went to his friend George, confiding plans to him and asking for help, the fellow slave informed against him:

The overseer came directly to the cabin and sent in George to question me, while he should listen without. George asked me if I intended to run away, provided he would give me the jacket and some meal; being partly asleep I answered that I did not know. He repeated the question several times and still received the same answer. The overseer then hollered out, hey you son of a bitch, you are going to run away are you, I'll give it to you: bring him out here. So they brought me out and horsed me upon the back of Planter George, and whipped me until I could scarcely stand.⁵

Bitter and resentful, he did run away, but was captured by a neighbor and brought back. Again Grimes escaped to the woods and remained for three days; forced by hunger to return, he appealed to his master. The owner

³ *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*, written by himself (New York, 1825), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

gave orders that the slave was not to be whipped without his consent, but the overseer repeated the flogging after Grimes had the "impertinence" to call a slave girl "miss."

Afraid to complain, he was constantly given hard work and little food:

Colonel Thornton was a severe master, and he made his slaves work harder than anyone about there, and kept them poorer. Sometimes we had a little meat or fish, but not often anything more than our peck of meal. We used to steal meat whenever we could get a chance; and such was my craving for it, that if the punishment had been death, I could not have resisted the temptation.⁶

Once ravenously hungry, he ate hog's entrails which were several days old and nearly died in consequence. When he recovered, he was compelled to beat out hominy after his work in the field was done; yet having stayed up nearly all night doing his task, Grimes was severely flogged for not having accomplished enough:

It seems as though I should not forget this flogging when I die; it grieved my soul beyond the power of time to cure. I should not have been alive now if I had remained a slave, for I would have resisted with my life, when I became older, treatment which I have witnessed towards others, from the overseers and such as I should probably have met with, nay, such as I have received when a boy from overseers.⁷

At about this time Grimes thought that several slaves had been poisoned:

Several of the servants in the spinning room died, and after that there was a groaning heard in that room; and I have myself heard the spirits groan in that room. If ever there was a room haunted it was that. I will believe it as long as I have breath to draw. I slept in the passage, close by the door of my master and mistress. Sometimes when I was as wide awake as I am now, the spirits would unlock the doors, and come up stairs, and trample on me, press me to the floor, and squeeze me almost to death. I should have screamed, but the fear of my master, who would not believe, but would have whipped me, prevented.⁸

This passage is an interesting clue to Grimes' mental state. The belief in "spirits," witches, and in occult happenings of the most fantastic sort

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

was common with the slaves.⁹ It is clear that as certain psychologists have pointed out, such superstitious beliefs are to be attributed to fear, ignorance and suppressed hate. Freud writes,

Superstition originates from repressed hostile and cruel impulses. The greater part of superstition signifies fear of impending evil and, he who has frequently wished evil to others, but . . . has repressed the same into the unconscious will be particularly apt to expect punishment for such unconscious evil in the form of a misfortune threatening him from without.¹⁰

More unstable than many of the authors of slave narratives, Grimes was frequently haunted by all sorts of occult manifestations. Taken to wait upon his master's son, a medical student, the slave was terrified by the skeletons in the garret. "My poor heart never walloped so before," he wrote.¹¹ On two occasions Grimes consulted fortune tellers in whose powers he fervently believed.

One of his ten masters owned an old slave called Frankee, whom Grimes thought was a witch. Because she often told her master lies about Grimes and was instrumental in his being whipped, his hostility toward her is not hard to explain. The two slaves slept in a room beneath their master's, and Grimes apparently lived in constant terror of Frankee's supernatural powers.

I have at different times of the night felt a singular sensation such as people generally call the night-mare; I would feel her coming toward me, and endeavoring to make a noise . . . but the nearer she approached me the more faintly I would cry out. I called to her, 'Aunt Frankee, Aunt Frankee,' as plain as I could, until she got upon me and began to exercise her enchantments on me. I was then entirely speechless making a noise like one apparently choking or strangling. My master often heard me make this noise in the night, and had called to me to know what was the matter; but as long as she remained there I could not answer. She would then leave me and go to her own bed. After my master had called her a number of times, 'Frankee, Frankee,' when she got to her own bed, she would answer, 'Sair?' 'What ails, Theo?' . . . She answered, 'Hag ride him, sair.' He then called to me, telling me to go and sleep with her. I could then, after she had left me, speak myself and also have use of my limbs.

⁹ The narratives of Hayden, Bibb, Ball, and Douglass present considerable detail to support this assertion.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Basic Writings* (New York, 1938), 165.

¹¹ *Life of William Grimes*, 16.

I got up and went to her bed, and tried to get under her coverlid, but could not find her. . . . I kept feeling for her, but could not find her. Her bed was tumbled from head to foot. I was then convinced she was a witch and that she rode me.¹²

When he was sold to a new master Grimes lodged in a room over the carriage house in which a man once died of a fit. All the slaves insisted that the place was haunted, and Grimes saw his usual hallucinations:

After lying there about an hour, I was looking very steady up towards the roof of the building, when to my great horror and surprise I could plainly perceive a large, bright, sparkling pair of eyes intently fixed on me, staring me full in the face.¹³

Stricken with a sense of guilt that he was doing wrong by sleeping in the dead man's bed, Grimes thereafter crouched on the floor.

William Grimes revealed himself throughout his autobiography as a highly strung, nervous man, and he said repeatedly that he was "afraid," "fearful," "terrified." His surroundings affected him profoundly, and whipping always filled him with horror. "I saw Bennett strip off James' shirt and whip his naked back part as if he had been cutting down a tree. I thought what was to be my fate."¹⁴ Of another slave he saw, Grimes wrote, "This poor man's back was cut up with the lash until I could compare it to nothing but a field lately ploughed."¹⁵ Again he said:

I at this time was in such dread of the whipping post, where I daily saw so many human beings sacrificed to the lash of the tyrant that it struck me with horror. I prayed constantly to my God to protect and defend me in this adversity.¹⁶

His reaction to a certain master was: "He was cross to me, and I feared him like death."¹⁷ Grimes on one occasion was driving the coach for his mistress and lost the way, but he was so fearful of punishment for his error that he pretended to know the road and wandered about until luckily he regained it.

Unsuccessful in his attempts to escape, Grimes sought to mutilate himself, to break his own leg. He often pretended to be ill, went on

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

hunger strikes and in one instance managed by this device to get a new master.¹⁸ Moreover, he drank heavily whenever he could get whisky. His behavior showed marked aggression, as when he fought with his master's other servant Cato, and bit off the latter's nose.¹⁹ In another fight with a Negro driver Grimes beat the man, struck him with his head and bit him, "hardly knowing what I was about, being so much terrified."²⁰

At the same time the slave showed considerable indifference and carelessness about his work. This attitude so incensed a master that he beat Grimes in his chest and face until he was "all in a gore of blood" and then sent him to jail.²¹ The jail had no water for washing, nor were the slaves given any changes of clothing.

The lice were so thick and large that I was obliged to spread a blanket on the floor, and as they crawled up on it, take a junk or porter bottle . . . and rolled it over the blanket repeatedly, and in the same way that I have seen people grind or powder mustard seed on a board.²²

Shortly afterwards Grimes was released from prison and finally made his escape from slavery by stowing away on a ship bound for Boston. But even in the North, some years later, he was recognized by one of his master's friends, retaken, and "forced to purchase his freedom with the sacrifice of all he had earned."²³ Although he became a free man, he never really adjusted himself to the society around him; he had persistent feelings of guilt, prayed, searched his soul and repented of his sins:

My conscience used sometimes to upbraid me with having done wrong, after I had run from my master and arrived in Connecticut; and while I was living in Southington, Connecticut . . . I went up on a high mountain and prayed to the Lord, to teach me my duty that I might . . . know whether or not I ought to go back to my master. . . .²⁴

He finally decided, however, that God had delivered him "out of the land of Egypt, and out of the house of bondage."²⁵

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, III.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

The same guilt over running away was experienced by Solomon Bayley, William Parker and others. Such feelings were not only evidence of the effectiveness of the slaveholder's teaching, but also, and more significantly, they indicate how guilt followed closely upon fear and aggression. William Grimes, having escaped bondage, lived in a half-dozen cities in New England and engaged in a score of different occupations from janitoring at Yale College to keeping a barber shop in Providence. At the same time he was constantly involved in law suits and was once tried for rape and acquitted. A restless and rather pathetic man, he did not find in the North the freedom that meant peace of mind. Even though some of his behavior was pathological, Grimes was an ordinary man; he did not have the latent powers of a Frederick Douglass or the mind of a James W. C. Pennington. It is reasonable to suppose that thousands of fugitives were, perhaps, not unlike him in their suffering, in their fear, and in the difficulties they faced in freedom.

For most Americans slavery and its consequences for the Negro are still rather vague and unreal. The narratives of slaves bring certain facets of the institution into clear focus. The experiences of William Grimes are an indictment of the society which made him a slave. His autobiography shows that in his case physical punishment, lower caste status, the denial of every chance for improvement marked him with spiritual scars which made his life extremely difficult even after his escape to freedom. Grimes felt keenly the anomaly of maintaining the institution of plantation slavery in a democratic society. He wrote bitterly at the end of the account of his life:

If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would, in my will, leave my skin a legacy to the government, desiring that it be taken off and made into parchment and then bind the constitution of glorious, happy, and *free* America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American liberty!²⁶

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.