

Learning to Write: The Narrative of Frederick Douglass

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Frederick Douglass claimed that he began to become free when he learned to write. Part of what he meant was that in writing he found the means to see himself as himself rather than as his masters saw him.¹ But he also meant that writing enabled him to cross between two different kinds of identity and two different kinds of world. One of these kinds of identity I will call “selfhood,” an identity governed from within by need and desire and from without by force and fortune. The other I will call “citizenship,” an identity which gives law to itself in the form of duty and law to others in the form of rights. Only this latter kind of identity can enter into deliberation with other people and live in a truly public world. In learning to write, Douglass discovers the identity of the citizen, as opposed to that belonging merely to the self; in the three autobiographies he produced between 1845 and 1892, he fashions that public identity for himself and for others.

The first observation one must make about the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* is that it is a romantic autobiography: in addition to serving the immediate political exigencies it was designed to answer, it concerns itself with the creation of a powerful literary identity. As such, Douglass’ book can be aligned as strongly with *The Prelude* or *Song of Myself* as with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The *Narrative’s* participation in this genre, however, is complicated by the fact that it attempts several contradictory tasks: it must testify simultaneously to the barbarity of slavery and to the human strength which

¹For studies which read Douglass this way, see the several readings of Douglass in Gates, Baker, Stepto, Andrews, and Olney. All citations to Douglass will be to *Frederick Douglass: The Narrative and Selected Writings*, Michael Meyer, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1984).

even slavery has not been enough to subdue. It must, like *Song of Myself*, simultaneously attest to and deny the uniqueness of its author, accounting for the individual power and eloquence of the author in a way which does not compromise the author's ability to speak for others who have endured the same conditions. The *Narrative* speaks at once for the mass and for the most individuated of individuals—and in doing so it suffers a tension which perhaps inheres in the works of all those who take democracy seriously, and which only our own commitment to democracy prevents us from seeing as a tension.² The unique contribution of the *Narrative* consists in the fact that the identity it creates is not only the profound selfhood of other romantic works—that mysterious source of integrity, distinctness, and power—but also the identity of the citizen, who has a public role to play in a world of law and rights. Behind Douglass' nineteenth-century ideal of private and unfathomable selfhood stands an essentially eighteenth-century ideal of citizenship and public duty.

Like other slave narratives, Douglass' text attempts to show that slavery, bad as it is, has not disabled the slaves from ever taking part in American political life; indeed, slavery has given them capacities and insights which they would not have come by in any other way.³ Thus the *Narrative* presents one

²The issue of "voice" in this work thus ties it directly into the mainstream of American romanticism. Henry Louis Gates, in *Figures in Black*, has noted the special tensions black writers suffer when they must speak for their race as a whole. A recent biographer of Douglass, Dickson J. Preston, noting Douglass' almost obsessive concern for himself as a self-created public man, uses biographical evidence to reveal the extent of Douglass' participation in a cultural life to which he seems very alien in his autobiographies. Preston notes, for instance, that although Douglass portrays himself as having no meaningful family ties; he was in fact the product of a five-generation stable matriarchy. In later works, Douglass treats his mother in more detail; apparently, despite his portrayal of her in the *Narrative*, she was not only a forceful personality but literate. Why Douglass should go to such lengths to detach himself from this past in the 1845 *Narrative* is worth pondering.

³William L. Andrews has argued that there is a strong difference between slave narratives written before and after the Civil War, a difference which can be accounted for by attending to the different rhetorical circumstances and aims of their authors. The pre-war authors were principally concerned with making their case against slavery in the strongest possible terms; for them, as a rule, slavery was a barbarous and vicious condition fraught with degrading consequences for both slave and master. The post-war authors of slave narratives were principally concerned with showing that, however hard their lives under slavery might have been, the former slaves were not warped to such an extent as to be unfit for citizenship. In fact, the post-war authors argued that slaves had learned, through the hard school of slavery, many of the very political skills which would enable them to live in peace with their former masters once they had adjusted themselves to new relations

version of the political education provided by the experience of being a slave. Its politics, however, are as extraordinary as its author, for its primary lessons are not about suffering and cruelty, submission and dominance (the lessons usually taught, intentionally or otherwise, by the experience of oppression), but about the futility of contests over power and, consequently, the necessity and availability—even in the midst of passionate political conflicts—of a public realm where people seek to prevail against each other by means other than force. The *Narrative* seeks to prove, not only in the face of slavery but also in the face of the slave's justifiable rage against it, the necessity of citizen virtues and the primacy of politics over violence.

The 1845 *Narrative* originated of course not as a demonstration of the kind of metaphysical authenticity' and depth' which has since been found in it, but as a certification that Douglass, who had been impressing audiences at abolition meetings all over the North for several years with his testimony, was in fact an escaped slave who could describe from experience slavery's nature. Douglass had to prove that he was not the impostor which many shrewd Yankees suspected him of being—not an educated Northern free black but a self-educated ex-slave, formerly the property of a man still living in Talbot County, Maryland. Douglass' patrons, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, imagined the *Narrative* as the seal of authenticity on Douglass's speeches, which were to them the real objects of value; they hoped it would lay questions to rest so that Douglass could get on with what they believed to be his real work. The document he gave them was quite different from what they expected, not only in that it was full of the same urbanity and sophistication which had caused the skeptics to doubt the orations in the first place, but also in that it cultivated a tone of lucid detachment more characteristic of a legislator than a victim of oppression.

All of Douglass' hearers and readers were prepared for eloquence, but they were not prepared for the kind of eloquence he gave them. They expected from him the native power of a sensibility schooled in a nonwhite rhetorical tradition—something they got from Chief Seattle, say, or Chief Logan, whose famous lament was already considered a classic of oratory. When Douglass spoke, however he spoke as a polished and mature speaker in the idiom which they thought to be specifically characteristic of educated white people. He

with them. Douglass wrote several such narratives—before the war and one after it—and even in the first he clearly wishes to perform both tasks: he has his eye not only on the present difficulties of slavery but on the future difficulties to be faced as former slaves seek to be integrated into the political life of the United States.

did not as he was repeatedly urged to do, “bring a little of the plantation” into his speeches, and he did this still less in the autobiographies of 1845, 1855 and 1881. It would be easy enough—but also mistaken—to argue that Douglass adopted idioms which his hearers (not Douglass himself) might call specifically “white” as a way of detaching himself from a legacy which embarrassed and maybe disempowered him. Douglass understood that the appeal he wished to make required several things from him; and it was best not to be sentimental about them. Were he to speak in a dialect not shared by his white friends and his enslavers, he could perhaps move them to pity and wonder; but if he were to adopt that dialect which his friends and his enemies shared, he could do something else—he could engage them in articulate conflict. The sense of principled disagreement governing such conflict would be very different from the sense of pathos a speech in his own dialect might have aroused in that same audience.

In the *Narrative*, Douglass holds both himself and his readers responsible to this requirement of principled disagreement. Indeed, this very responsibility—required not only in the by and by of some world where people no longer oppress each other, but in the midst of the conflict over slavery—is one of the main achievements of Douglass’ book. It is rare for people to insist upon an ideal of fair disagreement when they take seriously the disagreements they find themselves caught up in. This is not to say that Douglass believes that we live in a world governed by such an ideal; rather, it is to say that unless one attempts to hold oneself to the requirements of principled disagreement, all of one’s efforts, no matter how just the aims, are already devoted to futility. The principal gift of literacy, Douglass believes, is the ability to imagine a world in which people exercise and require responsibility to each other even in their most profound conflicts.

One of the surprises about the 1845 *Narrative* is that Douglass presents the slaves as people capable of holding their own within slavery. Rather than being utterly disempowered, the slaves have various means at their disposal which enable them to improve their lot within slavery and insist upon a certain measure of human respect from the masters. These means of power enable the slaves to play off the masters’ ideology, but they do not suffice to set the slaves free. This attests to the fact that, for Douglass, freedom is more than merely the ability to shift ideological registers or to trip up one’s oppressor in his own contradictions.

The means of power available to the slave within slavery seem to be of three kinds, and it is important not to underestimate them.

First, slaves were quite capable of making their masters take seriously the force of their recalcitrance, if not their resistance. Recent students of slavery such as Eugene Genovese have shown how slaves were able to impose their own work rhythms upon their masters (a fact even Olmstead noticed), and how slaves used their awareness of their own economic value to force concessions out of their masters. They were too expensive to kill, and even frequent beating, as the slaveowners agricultural magazines argued, would usually prove a self-defeating practice.

Douglass presents the power of recalcitrance most clearly in his famous description of his fight with Covey, the notorious “slave-breaker” to whom Captain Thomas Auld has leased him in hopes of rendering him more tractable. When Douglass finally comes to grapple with Covey it is a one on one fight—Covey’s white help being put out of action by a timely kick to the groin. Even his black help refuses to come to Covey’s aid: When Covey asks another slave to help him hold Douglass down, that slave refuses, saying with some dignity that he had been leased to Covey to work, not to whip, and Covey curiously seems to accept this. Covey and Douglass wrestle for two hours, at the conclusion of which Covey lets go, pretending for public consumption to have beaten his slave squarely (although he has clearly gotten somewhat the worst of a basically equal match) and claiming with a great show of bravado that, had Douglass not resisted, Covey would not have whipped him half so much. This moment is interesting enough in itself, but what follows is even more interesting: Covey’s failure to call the instruments of state discipline to his aid. Douglass describes it in this way:

It was for a long time a matter of surprise to me why Mr. Covey did not immediately have me taken by the constable to the whipping-post, and there regularly whipped for the crime of raising my hand against a white man in defense of myself. And the only explanation I can now think of does not entirely satisfy me, but such as it is, I will give it. Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker. It was of considerable importance to him. That reputation was at stake; and had he sent me—a boy of about sixteen years old—to the public whipping-post, his reputation would have been lost; so to save his reputation, he suffered me to go unpunished. (82)

Douglass’ lesson here (echoed later by George Orwell in “Shooting an

Elephant”) is that force is itself alienating that the master is enslaved by his own picture of himself as a master and by the necessity of keeping that picture both before himself and before the world.

Even when the masters are at their cruelest, their actions derive from a sense of their own weakness, a sense which their slaves are among the first to detect. Consider for a moment the famous scene in which Douglass’ aunt is brutally whipped by Captain Anthony, the scene in which Douglass, as a young child, first becomes acquainted with the violence of slavery. Douglass describes how his aunt’s cries of pain seem to arouse Captain Anthony to whip her more and more severely. His sadism, however, seems to arise from his sense that he cannot control her—as if he whips her harder because every lash reminds him of the impotence of the last one. His abuse of power here is a product of his weakness elsewhere: his inability to make Aunt Hester do what he wishes her to do, and, even more deeply—the bluntness with which Douglass says this is amazing—his inability to compete successfully for Hester’s sexual favors with her slave lover, Lloyd’s Ned.

Even the master’s power to sexually exploit his female slaves turns into a variety of weakness in Douglass’ account of it. Notice the moral subtlety of Douglass’ account of how the master’s own power disables him:

The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves [his mixed-race children], out of deference to the feelings of his white wife; and, cruel as the deed may strike any one to be for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers, it is often the dictate of humanity for him to do so; for, unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his naked back: and if he lisp one word of disapproval, ills set down to his parental partiality, and only makes a bad matter worse, both for himself and the slave whom he would protect and defend. (20)

The entanglements and ironies of the masters’ power reveal that power cannot be a sufficient end in itself, even when the power one has in mind is the power to resist the master; for power, even power over one’s own destiny, is not freedom. Freedom, in Douglass’ account, is something other than having enough power to do as one pleases.

Douglass describes and criticizes a second means of power available to slaves within slavery. We might call this the power to be recognized as a

human being. It is important to be very clear on this point because one might at first assume that this sort of power is exactly what one cannot have as a slave. To be a slave, we almost want to say, is to be thought of as a thing, not as a human being. But we have to distinguish between the ability to recognize somebody's humanity—to recognize that a person has feelings and thoughts deserving of consideration and respect, as well as a moral capacity to which that person is responsible—and the ability to recognize what I will call somebody's citizenship, which is to say, somebody's ability to stand with me in the public arena where we may make claims against each other about our rights and duties. It is on this distinction that Douglass' indictment of slavery finally rests, for the slaveholders are generally capable of recognizing their slaves' humanity but they are not, by definition, capable of recognizing their slaves' citizenship.

If we confuse these two things, humanity and citizenship, we are likely to miss the point of Douglass' indictment of slavery. To confuse the slave's private identity (as someone with whom the masters are in continuous and sometimes close relationships) and the slave's public identity (as someone outside the confines of polity) is to transform the debate from one about the nature and rights of citizenship to one about the nature and intensity of the slave's and the slaveholder's feelings. Arguments about how people feel, about whether their feelings are genuine or not, are almost always pointless. Within the terms of such an argument, the slaveholders can defend themselves merely by testifying that, of course, they understand the human feelings of the slave and that, of course, they do as much as possible to consider those feelings. The fact of the matter is that slaveholders were forced in a thousand ways to grant the humanity of their slaves, and the fact that they did so makes not the slightest bit of difference about the morality of slavery.

Looking hard at Douglass' *Narrative*, one discovers that only once—immediately before the fight with Covey—does Douglass describe slavery as the confusion of persons with things. What is obliterated by slavery is not the slave's connection to the world of human feeling, a connection which in one way or another most of Douglass' masters seem very well aware of (and which Douglass himself—if his conversation with Thomas Auld on his deathbed many years after Emancipation is any indication—knew they were aware of); what slavery obliterates is the connection between the slave as a psychological and moral being and the slave as a political being, as someone capable of deliberating, rendering public judgment, and pressing public

claims.

Douglass presents several examples of masters who work hard at kindness and whose kindness is not entirely the product of their desire for esteem in their neighbors' eyes. Sometimes, of course, when a slave calls a master good the slave is merely being defensive, not knowing perhaps the questioner's ulterior motive in asking about the master's kindness; but not all kindness in this book is illusion or self-deceit, although almost all of it is perfectly futile. Indeed, the futility of kindness, or the futility of basing human polity on feeling, frequently concerns Douglass. He makes his case most strongly when considering the course of his relationship with Sophia Auld, the wife of his Baltimore master, Hugh Auld.⁴

Mrs. Auld is introduced auspiciously enough as a woman of deep sympathy whose passions are not yet corrupted by slaveholding:

Mr. and Mrs. Auld were both at home, and met me at the door with their little son Thomas, to take care of whom I had been given. And here I saw what I had never seen before; it was a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions; it was the face of my new mistress, Sophia Auld, I wish I could describe the rapture that flashed through my soul as I beheld it. It was a new and strange sight to me, brightening up my pathway with the light of happiness. . . . My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door,—a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver: and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness(44, 46)

⁴In an important article, Eric J. Sundquist has speculated upon the different roles played by Douglass's actual and metaphorical parents—how Sophia Auld and Douglass's actual literate mother seem to interpenetrate each other, and how Douglass keeps attempting to separate himself from those who would place themselves in a paternal position (not only Captain Anthony but also William Lloyd Garrison). Sundquist argues that it was literacy which enabled Douglass to become “self-fathered,” by enabling him to fashion new fathers for himself out of his understanding of the revolutionary idealism of the Founding Fathers and out of his desire to link the Founders with leaders of slave revolts such as Nat Turner or Madison Washington.

Mrs. Auld immediately sets about teaching Douglass one valuable lesson—how to read—but winds up teaching him another even more valuable one. When her husband learns what she is doing, he forbids her to continue, arguing that literacy will unfit Douglass for slavery. Mrs. Auld’s acquiescence to this decree teaches Douglass valuable lessons about both the futility of the feeling of humanity and the crucial value of literacy. Owning slaves seems to change Mrs. Auld’s physical appearance as much as her moral constitution:

The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon. (46)

Mrs. Auld’s case demonstrates the futility of relying on the mere feeling of human kinship to work any real adjustment in human affairs. Feeling is incapable of remedying the real problem, not only because it is unstable and evanescent, but also because particular feelings tend to leap into their opposites. Stung by her husband’s rebuke, Mrs. Auld comes to outdo him in severity. “She finally became,” Douglass remarks, “even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better” (51). Mrs. Auld outdoes herself as a disciplinarian precisely because she is aware of running against the course of her feelings—she has to prove to herself that she is capable of doing what she conceives of as her duty. One sees in her ease a smaller version of what the Chinese author Nien Cheng, imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, noticed about her torturers: those who had consciences and felt badly about what they were doing were far more dangerous and brutal to her than those who had no consciences, because they had to use extra force in order to hold their consciences at bay. This suggests that feeling and power are equally futile. Whatever freedom is, it must have some basis other than the equilibrium of powers or the mutual bonds of feeling.

Recalcitrance and appeal to human feeling are two means of empowerment available to slaves. Douglass also discusses a third category in which the slaves retain some vestige of power and self-respect: the cultural means by which slaves cope with the psychological burden of slavery. The most important of these means arise from the folk culture the slaves partly brought

over from Africa and partly created for themselves. Interested as Douglass is in the folk culture of black people, he sometimes seems as detached from it as any white observer; he views that folk culture with a skepticism which must strike modern students of slavery as very strange. For example, the magic root which Sandy Jenkins gives to Douglass on the eve of the fight with Covey is treated with gentle comedy in the *Narrative*: Jenkins' insistence that it was the root which enabled Douglass to hold his own with Covey comes off as a mild joke at Douglass' expense. In the later version of this story, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass leaves out the comedy, and instead nervously denies that he ever took Jenkins' root with any seriousness, going out of his way to denounce such necromancy as foolish and even wicked. Rather than treating the root (as one might now) as an emblem of the integrity of black culture in the face of suffering (as, say, Ralph Ellison treats the sweet-potato pie in *Invisible Man*), Douglass treats it as a disabling diversion from the real question.

Douglass is even more stern about the efficacy of music as a response to suffering. Partly, of course, this is because he has a simple task in front of him—he has to prove that the singing of the slaves is not a sign of their happiness in slavery—but his criticism of slave music goes beyond what this agenda would require. Douglass opens his description of slave singing with a bemused detachment rather unlike what one would expect from a former slave, but rather like what one would expect from a white observer of slave customs like Frederick Law Olmstead or Mary Chesnut:

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound:—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they could manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:—

“I am going away to the Great House Farm!
Oh, Yea! 0, Yea! 0!”

This they would sing, as a chorus to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. (28)

Douglass goes on to assert that he has only come to understand the meaning of these “rude songs” since he has found freedom: only now, but not then, is he able to see them as “testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” This strange assertion gives us pause. If the singing is really an expression of something, what does it mean for Douglass to tell us that, not only was he incapable then of saying what was being expressed in the songs, but that if he had been asked about the true content of the songs, he would probably have given, in good faith, a totally incorrect answer?

I think the only way to sort all this out is to attend to Douglass’ powerfully mixed feelings on the subject. And to discover the origins of these mixed feelings we need to attend to ‘the mixed feelings which inform slave music itself. Douglass wants badly to see this music only as a cry of pain, as “the complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish.” Yet what the music reveals to him is the entanglement of joy with pain, or rapture with pathos. In this entanglement of joy and pain, modern readers tend to find one of the means by which slaves mustered the human strength to resist being dehumanized by their condition; it is not only evidence of misery but also testimony that human beings bravely carried on with human life in the face of misery. But what Douglass finds in this music is quite different. To argue that slaves are able to muster enough of their human resources to resist giving way utterly to the cruelty of slavery would be in Douglass’ mind (if not in ours) to weaken the case Douglass wishes to make against slavery. To solve his problem he follows his description of the mixed feelings which interpenetrate each’ other in slave music with the claim that, despite the ambivalent description just given, slave music really is only a cry of pain and nothing else. Yet no sooner does he make this claim than it is undone in turn by the force of his own emotional response to the memory of this singing—as if, despite his presentation of slave music as enslaved music, he cannot help but be moved by it. The mixed feelings which Douglass will no longer allow to his enslaved brethren reappear as his own mixed feelings about their music. These mixed feelings give rise to Douglass’ distrust of

music, since they have the effect of entangling him in the very contradictions of feeling which he wishes to sort out.

All three of the means of resistance I have just discussed are finally only means of power, not means of right, and all three are bound up in the futility which always afflicts exercises of power, whether they succeed or fail. All three can adjust the relations of power within slavery, but none of them can transform the question from a question of power to a question of right. So long as one is unable to manage this transformation, Douglass implicitly argues, anything one does is finally futile, no matter how effective it may seem to be.

The only way to avoid futility in a conflict is by searching for a regulative abstraction to which both sides claim allegiance and which is the exclusive property or agent of neither side. The hope of being able to make this appeal to right renders conflict articulate, and distinguishes argument from screaming. This search for adjudicating principles finally defines what freedom is for Douglass as well—for freedom, in the *Narrative*, is not just the ability to do what one wishes (a freedom one never fully enjoys in any civil society but which few tyrannies can fully destroy), but the freedom to enter into articulate conflict with one's opponents. Freedom is not the ability to have what one desires but the ability to stand with one's opponents in the arena of principle.

It is likely that nobody, not even Douglass, has a very secure grasp on what the right is—our particular ideas about the right have a peculiar way of reflecting our interests. But if we recognize that there is right (even though nothing we say does justice to it) and if we recognize that sometimes we are capable of discovering ourselves to be mistaken, we hold out the hope at least of not always being made fools of by our desires. We also hold out the hope of learning something from our enemies, who are similarly responsible to a perplexing sense of right they are not fully in possession of. This is perhaps why we cannot fairly argue with anyone unless we can provisionally imagine those common values in whose terms we argue. We cannot fairly argue unless we can imagine circumstances in which we would own ourselves to be beaten.

We do not know what the right is. But we cannot argue in good faith with worthy opponents without accepting at least the conceivability of right, even as we deny that any particular claims we make about right, even claims we share with our enemies, can do full justice to right in itself. For unless a society can be assessed from an abstract point of view not entirely tangled up in the needs and desires of that society, our quarrels can never be about

anything other than which of us is the stronger one. To make this assessment, we do not need to know with certainty what right is, only that there is such a thing as right. Only if we can define such a point of view can we separate the idea of justice from the idea of force; only then can we see justice as anything other than what force wants.

In making this claim, I am aware of running somewhat against the current of contemporary literary thought. My claim is vulnerable to the charge that it seems to wish for some arena of absolute truth unaffected by the pressures of ideology or by those collective and usually only semi-conscious habits of thought which are among the means by which we subject each other to coercion. Maybe there is such a place; maybe also mortal flesh is not capable of living there. I do claim that we are sometimes capable of seeing—painfully—into our limitations, and in so doing we glimpse the possibility of a truth beyond those limitations, a truth to which we never do justice. It is no more possible to explicitly describe a region of truth outside of ideology than it is possible to describe a region of experience outside of perception; but this does not mean that such a region is impossible. Indeed, those who aver the impossibility of a region of truth beyond ideology find themselves relying on precisely the sort of metaphysical certainty which they argue we can never have. The doctrine that we are always entirely enwrapped in our ideologies finally despairs of persuasion and requires every serious conflict to be submitted to the arbitration of blood. . It projects a world in which only the strong have any place. Most people today who take a strong view of ideology—and, in consequence, a strong view of moral relativism—intend their line of thought to be liberating. But any view that ultimately gives primacy to force can never liberate those who lack force. It is no accident that the strong view of ideology has been for our century what the divine right of kings was to earlier centuries—the most powerful available rationale for authoritarian government.

Douglass' most bitter claim against slavery concerns the slaves' lack of recourse when they have been cruelly treated. He directs his anger not only against the inability of slaves to bring murderous masters to court but, in a larger sense, against the inability of the slave to claim any legal standing whatsoever. It was in fact illegal for masters to murder their slaves; but masters could not be tried for doing so (Douglass provides us with several examples of this, the most famous being the murder of Demby by the overseer Mr. Gore) because slaves could not give testimony in court. Resort to public means of redress—courts, the political arena, and so forth—was closed off

even to sympathetic masters when they sought to defend their slaves. This seems to be the point of the story Douglass tells of Hugh Auld's inability to bring to justice the carpenters who, resenting the competition of leased slave carpenters, beat Douglass up when Hugh Auld leases him to their shipyard.

Of course, the legal arena is not the only place in the public world where slaves cannot appear. Slaves are denied family names (Douglass runs through four of them in the course of the book). Even other public institutions—such as marriage—are in theory if not always in practice unavailable to the slaves. The slaves' ability to place themselves in public time by specifying a birth date leaves them no choice but to place themselves in natural time—they can say they were born in cherry-blossom time but not in March, 1818.

Douglass calls literacy the pathway from slavery to freedom because it promises recourse to the public world. Consider the book from which Douglass learns to read, *The Columbian Orator*, apparently a staple of both Northern and Southern education. What the slaveholder's own book teaches him is only scarcely less surprising than the fact that this lesson comes from a slaveholder's book.

Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect: for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of his master. (52)

In this book, Douglass finds a model for the kind of book he is himself attempting to write in the *Narrative*.⁵ He discovers not only what he already knew—that slavery is miserable and capable of being resisted by force—but that slavery is wrong according to the masters' own precepts, and that the masters themselves (as Thomas Auld was in fact to confess to Douglass at the time of their deathbed interview) understand that slavery is wrong and can

⁵Douglass had similar ambitions in his novella *The Heroic Slave*. See Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*.

possibly be persuaded to do something about it. He discovers it is possible to meet the master not only in the self-defeating arena of conflict over power or feeling but also in the far more promising arena of public and articulate conflict, conflict in which both sides have to search for arguments which will tell against each other.

This hunger for a regulative principle explains two crucial actions of Douglass' later political career. It explains, first, Douglass' founding of the *North Star* against the advice of Garrison. Certainly Douglass, in writing for himself, comes into the world more truly as himself than he would have done had he remained merely Garrison's protégé: but it is also the case that writing itself—writing texts which have some permanence and can be read by anybody, as opposed to making speeches mainly heard by already sympathetic audiences—answers more fully to Douglass' sense of himself as a citizen with public responsibilities.

This same hunger explains Douglass' far more controversial adherence to the U.S. Constitution at a time when most abolitionists, echoing Garrison, thought of that document as “an agreement with Death and a covenant with Hell.” The Garrisonians thought of themselves as secessionists, demanding “No Union With Slaveholders.” Part of Douglass' criticism of the Garrisonian position arose from his sense of its inability to free anybody. Secession of the North might have freed New England from moral entanglements and delivered to New Englanders the clean hands we have generally valued above everything else, but it would have left the slaves in a state where there were no advocates for their cause. Douglass' deepest objection to Garrison's position, however, rested on his understanding of what the alternative to the Constitution would be.

Garrison burned the Constitution because of the dirty compromises with which he felt it to be besmirched; in place of the Constitution he honored the unwritten and unwriteable imperatives which motivated that document but which, in his view, the Constitution betrayed. For Garrison, the alternative to constitutional law was “higher law.” If the Constitution is the letter that killeth, the higher law is the spirit that giveth life. And yet, in the final analysis, higher law produces moral compulsions about which we need not persuade ourselves or anybody else. To claim the warrant of higher law is not to shift the argument to some higher level of abstraction in search of a regulative principle; it is, on the contrary, to claim that the time for argument has passed and the time for shooting is about to begin. The higher law, being unwriteable and nonnegotiable, allows no one opposing us to find a way of

telling against us when they disagree with us.

Douglass understood that the alternative to the Constitution was the endless entanglement of fights over power. For all its flaws, the Constitution was finally the instrument of freedom because it embodied principles to which the South had already declared its allegiance. These principles, Douglass argued, were incompatible with slaveholding. Freedom was for Douglass the ability to argue with others in a common arena, using common appeals, using those agreements one must already have with one's opponents (if one is to argue with them rather than shoot them) as a way not only of persuading them but also of redeeming them. To burn the Constitution would be to burn the one thing which redeems our desires from futility, to burn our only instrument for translating our quarrel from a quarrel over force (in which the slaves were finally bound to lose) into a quarrel over right (in which, Douglass believed, even the slaveholders would be forced to reach his conclusions).

What Douglass discovers when he learns "the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder" is not only a way to replace self-defeating force by more promising persuasion, but also a new kind of identity. For no longer is he merely his natural self—the child of an unidentified mother, born in cherry-blossom time rather than in March—nor even merely his social self—the slave of so-and-so, whom he can perhaps force not to beat him. He becomes also Frederick Douglass the citizen, not only the bearer of desires, wishes, and capacities of force, but also the bearer of rights and of duties, someone capable of appearing in the public arena and arguing with someone else on common grounds of persuasion.

This new identity, citizenship, opens up the possibility of some response to the problem of enslavement which does not always and continuously undermine itself. It makes credible the possibility that we can enter into relationships other than those of submission, force, and solidarity, that we can enter into relations of persuasion, articulate conflict, and respect. His entry, through learning to write, into the world of this kind of relationship redeems Douglass from the futility to which every act which arises out of interest, need, or feeling is subject. It makes possible actions which are not futile because they tie themselves not to the metabolism of nature or to the metabolism of social process but to the governance of commonly held first principles. Furthermore, even as citizenship raises Douglass from futility, so it also raises his opponents, transforming them into people who can be appealed to—and redeemed from error—in terms of their own values.

To say that one's opponents are redeemable is to make a large claim,

and one must make that claim with precision, for it is the central claim of all rhetorical theory that is worth anything. When Douglass implicitly claims his opponents are redeemable he does not necessarily mean that he will inevitably have his way with them: nor does he necessarily mean even that he understands them fully. All he means is that he is resolved to attend to those higher agreements in whose terms all real disagreements are undertaken. The determining ground which will decide the conflict may not even exist, at least not yet, and he is under no illusions about the extent to which his opponents and he share a common world. But he is determined to attend to those higher agreements even in the face of his recognition that he and the masters may be living in different worlds, for he recognizes that those things which hold us apart, even if they clothe themselves with the appearance of utter certainty, areas provisional as any of our other beliefs.

Learning to write, Douglass seeks admission to a common moral world in which he is bound up with his opponents and in which he can hope to reach them by attending, in a disciplined and critical way, to the sources of his own beliefs. Let us say that writing delivers us into a world where we are responsible to a history we didn't make, where we are never quite free but also are never quite somebody whose story we already know all about. It delivers us into a world where we have a voice of our own, but where we speak to people who aren't ourselves and who have needs, desires, and beliefs which we must address if not always agree with. Writing also delivers us into a world governed by values which neither we nor our enemies are fully in possession of, but which give us the hope of persuading each other and living together as we ought.

Douglass paid a high price for this truth—among other things he gave up his own access to the cultural resources of his people. And at least at first glance it looks as if he did not get in return what his sacrifice was worth. For neither persuasion nor the Constitution finally freed the slaves; it took four years of war and a million lives. Of course Douglass did come to argue for violent resistance to slavery. Yet interestingly enough the nature of his argument seems to have protected him from undergoing that curious slide from pacifism to terrorism so characteristic of abolitionism in the late 1850's. The ex-pacifists could only imagine violence of an apocalyptic sort; but for Douglass even bloodshed remained closer to politics than to religion.

One sometimes wonders whether concepts such as the primacy of persuasion over force or the necessity of principled disagreement can ever stand the blast of urgent human miseries in whose presence they look like niceties. But

if the persuasion upon which Douglass places his stake is pale and weak, the domain of force one enters when leaving persuasion behind is infinitely confusing. We read about the wanderings of those who lose their way in force in the large type of the papers every day. If persuasion was ultimately unavailing, as Douglass in the late 1850's was to conclude, along with just about everybody else, it may well have been the hunger for the ideal of persuasion, in minds like Douglass' and Lincoln's, which prevented the violence that followed from descending into that endless and degrading cycle of outrage and retribution which is the usual consequence of force.

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