

FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S *MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM*: AMERICANIZATION AND NOVELIZATION OF *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE*

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I. The Problem of Authentication of Slave Narratives

Frederick Douglass, one of the most influential black leaders in nineteenth-century America, was born a slave in Maryland, and, after the escape to the North in 1838, became a traveling agent of Garrisonian abolitionism. He was already a powerful orator, the author of a slave narrative and the editor of the *North Star* (later called *Frederick Douglass' Paper*¹), the only successful black newspaper in the antebellum period, when Harriet Beecher Stowe asked him to give her some information about slavery in composing her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.² Douglass politely refused her request probably because of the emotional conflict that he had constantly experienced working with white abolitionists, the struggle to create and preserve his own story against the constraints to mold it into the discourse of their antislavery cause.³

His first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), like many other slave narratives, was authenticated and, therefore, framed to some extent by the prominent white abolitionists. William Lloyd Garrison who offered the "Preface" praises Douglass's eloquence and power to "write his own Narrative in his own style" (Douglass <4> 34), yet eventually appropriates the whole essay to promote his antislavery cause, urging the audience to choose between "the man-stealers" and "their down-trodden victims" (37) and to adopt his motto "NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVE-HOLDER!" (38) In her review of the *Narrative*, Margaret Fuller criticizes his preface as being too indulgent in "violent invective and denunciation" (133), while admiring the main text by Douglass. Wendell Phillips provides another preface in the guise

of a letter which celebrates the completion of the narrative but ends in commending paradoxically to burn the manuscripts, expressing his furious lament that there is no safe place for a fugitive slave even in Massachusetts, the ground of a glorious American history; he concludes his letter, supposedly addressed to Douglass but apparently to the white audience, with the typical abolitionist rhetoric to advocate “consecrating anew the soil of the Pilgrims as an asylum for the oppressed” (Douglass <4> 40). Neither of the two prefatory essays introduces in a real sense the author or his work.

A decade later, in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass was to epitomize this problematic force of “authority” in the passage referring to his first public speech at the anti-slavery convention held in Nantucket: Garrison took “me as his text” (267). He clearly denounces the way the Garrisonians exploit his story for the purpose of gaining converts to their cause. As some critics suggest, *My Bondage and My Freedom* is a declaration of independence (McFeely <1> 181; Edwards <2> xxviii). It is not merely an augmented *Narrative* with added details and new information about his life after the encounter with Garrison in 1841, the episode with which he closes his earlier narrative. Douglass, from the beginning, makes the reader conscious of differences between the 1845 and the 1855 autobiography. The opening “Editor’s Preface,” for example, is nothing more than a preface written by himself, since the anonymous editor quickly gives way to “Douglass’s letter,” by saying that “the best Preface to this volume” is perhaps provided by the author’s letter (Douglass <3> 7), and thus leaves Douglass to authenticate his own story. This is a kind of a parody of the Phillip’s letter heading the *Narrative*, and a bold challenge to the tradition of slave narratives in which black authors have been taken in someone else’s text. The two possessive pronouns in the title of the second book sound suggestive of the author’s recapturing of his own text in contrast to the phrase suggesting an indefinite person, “an American Slave,” in the title of the first one.

The subsequent introduction also is no longer written by any white authority but by James McCune Smith, a free black, who often contributed to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* and who, like Douglass, struggled to pursue his career amid harsh racial prejudice and achieved

the great feat of becoming a doctor when there were very few black doctors in the States.⁴ Unlike Garrison who shows Douglass as an example of victims of slavery, Smith introduces him from the start as an exceptional and respectable self-made man and, thereby, a “Representative American man—a type of his countrymen” (Douglass <3> 29), echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Smith’s emphasis on “American-ness” is quite significant because it adumbrates what follows in the main text; it, in fact, tells of the major distinctive characteristics of the expanded volume made conspicuous when compared with the earlier compact *Narrative*: (1) the presentation of self as an American rather than a southern (ex-)slave, (2) the shift from the convention of slave narrative to the more strategic American revolutionary rhetoric, and (3) a declaration of possible American black literature.

Douglass wrote three autobiographies in his life, *Narrative, My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* published in 1881 and revised in 1893. Each of the books after *Narrative*, including the last 1893 version, largely revised and expanded its previous one. Brent Edwards maintains, quoting the words of C. Peter Ripley, that these three autobiographies were written at important points in Douglass’s life “for different reasons” (<2> xviii), and he regards it as important to pay special attention to the drastic change from the first to the second: “*My Bondage and My Freedom* is written from an entirely different vantage point—one might almost say that it is composed by an entirely different writer” (<2> xix).⁵ A close examination of some of the main differences illuminates Frederick Douglass as an American writer as well as a black nationalist.

II. Repossessing the Philosophy of the *Narrative*

Although the outline of *My Bondage and My Freedom* roughly follows that of *Narrative*, twenty-five chapters of the former more than double eleven of the latter. What expands the skeletal, pamphlet-like *Narrative*⁶ into a bulgy book of autobiography comparable to the classic one by Benjamin Franklin comes not so much from the new chapters

about his life in the North as from his rewriting the episodes already depicted in the *Narrative*—furnishing more graphic details to them, supplementing them with further relevant memories, and giving analytic interpretations of his experience. This extensive revision was chiefly caused by Douglass's growth as a person both private and public. In other words, his new self needed a new form of expression (Edwards <2> xx). After the publication of the *Narrative*, Douglass traveled for two years broadly in Ireland and England where he was treated as an able and important speaker equal to any white person and he felt, for the first time, almost entirely free from racism and from the prescribing power of the American abolitionists. This successful lecture tour resulted in the donation of 2,500 dollars to start his own newspaper.

He then began to assume multi-tasks, as the publisher and editor of the weekly *North Star*, of collecting essays and information, editing contributors' writings, reviewing a number of books, as well as writing articles and editorials, responding to letters from the reader. By the mid-1850s, as Edwards recapitulates his remarkable achievements, Douglass's reading and writing had given himself "a thorough training in literature and journalism in a way . . . he had never had the chance to do before composing the *Narrative*" (<2> xix). The broader experience and knowledge could no longer contain Douglass within the role of providing facts about slavery for the white antislavery activists.

The gap between the Douglass as a slave and the present matured Douglass, however, was felt by him much earlier when he co-worked with Garrisonians. He discloses in *My Bondage and My Freedom* the way in which he was exhibited like a rare animal on the platform: "I was generally introduced as a 'chattel'—a 'thing'—a piece of southern 'property'—the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak" (268-69). One of his abolitionist friends tried to "pin me down to my simple narrative," and another said, "Give us the facts . . . we will take care of the philosophy" (269). This patronizing attitude of his northern friends indicates not only their controlling power over his story but also their deprivation of his subjective voice by treating him like an unthinking child. Douglass voices his repulsion for being directed to repeat the same simple story:

I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them. (269)

Douglass here declares himself to be a being capable of thought and progress like any American citizen, and not just a “thing” turned into a man.

The tension between what he really wants to express and what he is required to present is seen in the 1845 version, constituting a dynamic force to the narrative. Though it has not entirely disappeared from *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he narrates much more easily and freely. In order to create and keep his own authentic voice, he employs in the 1855 version varied strategic literary devices rather than the oratorical rhetoric of vehement complaint to draw sympathy and wrathful denunciation to call for justice. He puts less emphasis, for instance, on the lack of knowledge of who his father is.⁷ In the *Narrative* the privation of knowledge about the paternal lineage is closely related with the general ignorance that slaveholders imposed upon slave children and its opening passage tells the reader that he knew nothing of his birthday or age, of division of time (month and year), and that this lack of information was “a source of unhappiness to me even during my childhood” (41). However, *My Bondage and My Freedom* no longer laments the absence of father but expounds the slavery system that excludes the father from the slave “family”: “Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves. A person of some consequence here in the north, sometimes designated *father*, is literally abolished in slave law and slave practice” (40). Douglass eliminates the term “unhappiness” that conveys his personal sentiment and uses the more objective language that his inability to tell his exact age was one of his “earliest troubles” (40).

In place of the complaining passage about the forfeit of father associated with the fruit of knowledge that the white son is given as a natural right, he offers a much more amplified and richer description of his grandmother, Betsy Baily, who was the whole world to him. Like Harriet Jacobs’s grandmother, she substitutes for the mother removed from him soon after his birth. Douglass has probably learned from Harriet

Beecher Stowe's bestselling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that a picture of family separation is effective to stir the heart of the Victorian (female) readers. He first associates Betsy with home and conjures up a lowly but happy life in her cabin, reminding us of Uncle Tom's: the old cabin, however wretched it looked to the eyes of others, "WAS MY HOME—the only home I ever had; and I loved it, and all connected with it" (47).

After constructing the home of his early childhood supported by the versatility and affection of "Grandmother Betty," he then moves on to the scene in which he was suddenly taken to the master's domain and placed in many slave children, including his brothers and sisters who, in spite of the blood ties, were utter strangers to him because of their early separation. Douglass describes in a very impressive way how his heart "clave to [his] grandmother" (49) and how his deep sorrow was hard to be soothed. The new emphasis on the home serves to bring to the reader a bitter recognition that the slave has no family.

Douglass attaches another symbolic meaning to the forced departure from his first home, saying that "this was, in fact, my first introduction to the realities of slavery" (50). Replacing the melodramatic scene of his witnessing Aunt Hester (called Esther in *My Bondage and My Freedom*) being flogged by his old master, Captain Anthony, with this sad memory of his separation from his affectionate grandmother, he sloughs off the sensational gothic writing as the central discourse which the northern white audience expected in slave narratives: the cruel flogging tears up the naked body, causing gushes of blood and heart-rending screams on the part of the victim, and the uncontrollable demonic anger and sadistic pleasure on the part of the oppressor. As Eric J. Sundquist points out, the gothic was "a powerful instrument of social reform" (108), as is seen typically in Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839) full of sensational scenes in which the master cruelly injures the slave. The *Narrative* also exploits the gothic convention in describing the bloody scene of Aunt Hester's punishment: the master whipped her naked back until she was covered with blood and the "louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest" (45). Douglass thus dramatizes the episode as his initiation into the horror of slavery: "It was the blood-stained gate, the

entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass" (45).

As is often suggested, the scene of Captain Anthony's whipping young beautiful Hester is charged with sexual images. When the narrator insinuates that Hester was punished because she met a young man called Ned defying her master's prohibition order, it indeed has the aspect of a pseudo rape⁸ as an outlet of mixed emotions of vengeance, jealousy, and latent sexual desire. This sexualized episode comes to invoke an appalling Sodom, when connected with the rumor mentioned earlier in the same opening chapter that Douglass's father is Captain Anthony. Priscilla Wald remarks that the "eroticized language" reflects the Garrisonian view of slavery that Douglass shared (82).

The violence inflicted upon the female body presents one of the typical sensational spectacles and, more often than not, signifies objectification of the woman. If sexualization lies in the act of looking (McDowell 178), Douglass who witnesses and narrates the eroticized spectacle is also a participant. And it is true, as Deborah E. McDowell asserts, that the 1855 autobiography elaborates the description of the scene with added details and makes his voyeuristic role clearer (179); he was inside a little closet in the kitchen and literally peeping the scene "through the cracks of its unplanned boards" (Douglass <3> 76). Yet the scene is made less dramatic in the second text not only because it ceases to mark his entrance into slavery but also because it is relativized as a single instance of many that "opened my eyes to the cruelty and wickedness of slavery, and the heartlessness of my old master" (73). Before introducing the episode of Aunt Hester, Douglass depicts another young slave woman who was whipped ruthlessly by an overseer and asked Captain Anthony for protection, only to arouse his anger and to walk twelve miles back to her labor with her wounds unhealed. The episode, anticipating Douglass's similar experience, underscores the master's utter indifference to his slaves' suffering.

What is characteristic here, however, is the interposition of the author's view that this cruel treatment is partly a political necessity of the slavery system. He expounds how "inhumanity" is inevitably involved in the complex power structure that makes the slavery operative:

Was he dead of all sense of humanity? No, I think I now understand it. This treatment is a part of the system, rather than a part of the man. Were slaveholders to listen to complaints of this sort against the overseers, the luxury of owning large numbers of slaves, would be impossible. It would do away with the office of overseer, entirely; or, in other words, it would convert the master himself into an overseer. (74)

The sentence written in the present tense (“No, I think I now understand it.”) suggests that the present Douglass understands the deep meaning of his experience which was obscured to the past Douglass as a slave or even as a member of the Garrisonian group.

And when he goes on to introduce the next example, Aunt Hester’s whipping, Douglass again inserts an analytical comment on the mechanism that allows the slaveholder to indulge in uncontrollable passion: the slave-owner can “go *far beyond* the overseer” for “[what] may have been mechanically and heartlessly done by the overseer, is now done with a will. The man who now wields the lash is irresponsible. He may, if he pleases, cripple or kill, without fear of consequences” (75). It is the absolute power that the southern institution gives to the slaveholder, not his personal wicked nature, that drives him to unspeakable brutality. Both the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* contain the sensational depiction of “wrongs” poor slaves undergo and the language to “denounce” them, but the latter inclines more to the arguments to analyze the institution itself and thus attempts to recapture the “philosophy” of the slave narrative from the Garrisonians.

III. The Inverted Vision of the Master-Slave Relation

As he philosophizes slavery from the viewpoint of a slave and necessarily delves into more universal discussion of the institution, Douglass undermines the dominant anti- (and pro-) slavery discourse. Parting from the binary oppositions of the abolitionist rhetoric, the devilish wickedness of the master and the helplessness of the poor slave, *My*

Bondage and My Freedom presents a much more complex relationship of the master to the slave. Referring to the great gap, for instance, between the luxury of slaveholders and the poverty and physical wretchedness of slaves, Douglass soon inverts the vision by means of introducing the higher laws, as he transforms the somewhat proslavery phrase, "slavery is a greater evil to the master than to the slave," that echoes Thomas Jefferson⁹ or the selfish mistress Marie St. Clare in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,¹⁰ into a true antislavery discourse, carrying a tone of ominous warning: "The self-executing laws of eternal justice follow close on the heels of the evildoer here, as well as elsewhere" (89). Likewise, the worldly wealth of Colonel Lloyd reminiscent of Job's and the "Eden-like beauty" (62) of the Great Farm House are quickly shadowed by his slaves' firm secret belief that slaveholders go to hell; superstitious rumors are whispered among the slaves about ghosts haunting the family burying ground: "few of the slaves felt like approaching [the tombs] even in the day time" (63).¹¹

Throughout the 1855 text, Douglass insists that slaves are no chattel to be passively valued like domestic animals, but thinking animals to evaluate slaveholders, as well. Having come to own slaves by marriage, Thomas Auld is not a "*born* slaveholder" (149) and lacks the ability to manage his slaves who would not call him master, but only Captain Auld, however hard his wife directs them to: "Slaves, too, readily distinguish between the birthright bearing of the original slaveholder and the assumed attitudes of the accidental slaveholder; and while they cannot respect either, they certainly despise the latter more than the former" (150). Mr. Freeland, on the contrary, is a "well-bred southern gentleman" (194). Although he shares many defects common in his class, he has "some sense of justice, and some feelings of humanity" (194). What is best in him, however, is that he is not religious, unlike Mr. Auld and Mr. Covey, "[for] of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst" (194).

Religion of slaveholders is most harshly criticized because it is the very embodiment of their hypocrisy and deception. Mr. Covey, the merciless slave-breaker, is a self-proclaimed pious man and earnestly prays to God, but he is so corrupted as to purchase a young woman "as a breeder" and shuts her up with a hired man every night to increase his

“human stock” (167). Proslavery clergymen above all becomes the target of Douglass’s devastating sarcasm. He introduces two ministers who own slaves: one whips a slave disregarding whether he is good or bad because the “good slave must be whipped, to be *kept* good, and the bad slave must be whipped, to be *made* good” (195); and the other frequently lashes a slave “*in advance* of deserving it” (195) in order to nip his evil in the bud.

Denouncing the southern religion as utter sham is seen both in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, but in the latter it has become more aggressive especially in the augmented depiction of Cap. Thomas Auld’s profession of religion in a Methodist camp-meeting. Douglass closely watches him from behind a crowd to determine if his master’s conversion is a true one. The repeated expressions to show his intense gaze like “I could distinctly see” (151), “I could see his every movement,” or “I watched very narrowly” (152), are significant of his making Master Thomas a spectacle and creates a dramatic optical scene that may anticipate Henry James.¹² Contrary to the familiar situation in which slaves are rudely stared and valued by white masters and slave traders, Douglass here objectifies and estimates his own master. And he flatly denies in the end any possibility of Master Thomas’s religious progress because his profession does not lead to emancipation of his slaves or better treatment of them. As if deriding the fact that the master’s house has become the “preachers’ home,” he sums up the reality of his religion in the following pithy phrase: “while he *starved* us, he *stuffed* them [preachers]” (153).

What is foregrounded through these episodes is the slaves’ ability to see through the master’s deception without revealing their insight. By putting more weight on their power to grasp the truth rather than on their helplessness, *My Bondage and My Freedom* turns out the commonly accepted view of docile and servile slaves, for the caste relationship between the master and the slave is no longer fixed to the author of the 1855 autobiography. In examining a strategic narration in Nat Turner’s “Confessions” that Douglass inherits, Sandquist employs Orlando Patterson’s concept of “the master-slave relation as one of ‘parasitism’” (42), an idea extended from the Hegelian philosophy:

. . . the master, by various paternalistic strategies that amounted to self-deceptions rather than statements of natural relations, camouflaged his own parasitic dependence on the slave with the pretense that slaves were parasites upon their masters. For their part, slaves in turn camouflaged, or masked, their resistance to slavery—and hence the nature of their freedom through consciousness—only on occasion removing the mask and exposing the parasitic relationship of slavery as an “ideological inversion of reality.” (42)

Slavery is made possible by the reciprocal operation of slave’s pretense of obedience and the master’s tyranny that camouflages “his own parasitic dependence.” In this context, then, the slave’s silence bears a far more profound meaning than it first appears to have.

Like many other writers of slave narratives, Douglass illuminates the fact that slaves instinctively comprehend the danger in telling the truth.¹³ The unwitting utterance of their knowledge or true feelings result in being flogged or “sold down the river” and here comes their maxim: “a still tongue makes a wise head” (97). Whenever asked about their master, they automatically give a positive answer. Douglass, therefore, pretended to be most satisfied with his condition when he plotted the final escape, or he *still* keeps silent about the details of how he managed to escape to the North,¹⁴ which would have provided one of the most climactic scenes in the traditional captivity narrative.¹⁵

Silence is indeed a self-defense weapon to slaves. But it also serves as a sharp sword brandished over the slaveholder as Douglass underlines its strategic importance:

I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave. He should be left to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ready to snatch, from his infernal grasp, his trembling prey. In pursuing his victim, let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let shades of darkness, commensurate with his crime, shut every ray of light from his pathway. (241)

Douglass here transforms the image of a runaway slave in fear of the slave hunters that the master might have sent into an inverted image that the master is frightened by the shadow of “myriads of invisible tormentors, ready to snatch, from his infernal grasp.” Although this inverted image implies divine punishment, it somehow invokes a menacing image of slave rebellion. Silence of slaves can mean their deception or even “conspiracy” as in Harman Melville’s “Benito Cereno.”

IV. The Black Nationalist Discourse

As Sandquist suggests, Douglass’s first plan of the collective escape is described in a framework of conspiracy (84). He first starts to enlighten his friends, pouring his ideas of justice into their minds, and opening their eyes to their natural right to liberty. They regularly gather in a secret place to discuss their flight for freedom: “These meetings must have resembled, on a small scale, the meetings of revolutionary conspirators, in their primary condition” (210). Douglass elevates and justifies their scheme of disobedience by framing it in the American Revolution. And he equates their heroic determination to escape from their tyrannical rulers with the ethos of the Declaration of Independence or with Patrick Henry’s “liberty or death” patriotism, reiterating their unitedness and strong brotherhood. In this revolutionary conspiracy, he further associates himself with the founding fathers or the black heroes of the past insurrections, like Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, and underscores the heavy responsibility he has taken for the fate of his fellow members: “I was the instigator of the movement. The responsibility of the whole enterprise rested on my shoulders” (215). He thus engenders the black nationalism that glorifies black heroism in the revolutionary paradigm.

This kind of nationalist discourse reminds us of his well-known speech “What to the Slaves Is the Fourth of July?” delivered at Rochester in New York on July 5, 1852, and “The Heroic Slave” published in the same year. Both of the speech and the only fiction by him are apparently influenced by Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* not only in that they were composed in 1852 soon after the publication of the novel, but also in that

they are more or less responding to the bestselling novel.

His Fourth-of-July speech reflects George Harris's rebellious speech addressed to Mr. Wilson who is sympathetic for George's wretched condition as a slave but at the same time preaches against his breaking the country law:

“My country again! Mr. Wilson, *you* have a country; but what country have *I*, or any one like me, born of slave mothers? What laws are there for us? We don't make them, —we don't consent to them, —we have nothing to do with them; all they do for us is to crush us, and keep us down. Haven't I heard your Fourth-of-July speeches? Don't you tell us all, once a year, that governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed? Can't a fellow *think*, that hears such things? (185)

The frequent use of the two pronouns, “you” and “us,” helps to disclose the deep chasm between those protected by the national laws and those deprived of their natural rights, despite the former's sentimental affection for the latter. Following the you-and-us rhetoric and sharing the chief logic of George's refutation grounded on the principles of the Declaration of Independence (“all men are created equal,” and “[American] governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” (Baym 342), the speech by Douglass is more turbulent about the contradiction of the Republican democracy that allows slavery, condemning “your” glorious day as the blackest that reminds “us” (slaves) of the bondage, of being exiles outside the pale of “American people,” for “above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions!” (Douglass <5> 156)

There is certain difference in the intensity of aggressiveness between the two authors: whereas Stowe, as a Christian, a daughter of the evangelical Calvinist minister and the wife of the Calvinist theologian, is hesitant to resort to violence for redressing the national sin (George does not use the bowie knife or the gun that he carries, after all, to murder the white pursuers and even Dred, the more rebellious hero, vanishes from the story before fulfilling his planned insurrection), Douglass

clearly justifies the slave's "unlawful" action in *My Bondage and My Freedom*: "If he steals, he takes his own; if he kills his master, he imitates only the heroes of the revolution. . . . Make a man a slave, and you rob him of moral responsibility. Freedom of choice is the essence of all accountability" (149).

This justification of violence on the part of slaves is also endorsed in "The Heroic Slave" which is modeled on the 1841 rebellion led by Madison Washington on the slave ship *Creole*.¹⁶ In this novella Douglass more explicitly connects the slave rebel with the founding fathers as his name accidentally indicates, though the author's choice of the event is no accident. He first refers to the hero's birthplace, Virginia, as the locus related with Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, and makes the hero cry out, "I am no coward. *Liberty* I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it" (4). Along with his enthusiasm for liberty, he is endowed, like Douglass himself, with power of speech to move the audience and excellent leadership to organize his companies.

The story is an antithesis to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* whose pious Christian hero seems to gain victory only through death. Admitting the effect of presenting a merciful slave like Uncle Tom on one hand, Douglass (and probably many other black leaders) were apprehensive of the danger, on the other hand, of the image of a gentle, passive black man ready to be stereotyped and thereby controlled. "The Heroic Slave" aims to eliminate such an image. The author combines the two almost incompatible factors, wild force and gentle love, as Stowe does in her second antislavery novel, *Dred* (1856), when she creates a similar aggressive hero. While Washington is described as a giant who has animal-like power, "the strength of the lion, a lion's elasticity," he possesses a huge humane heart so that "[a] child might play in his arms, or dance on his shoulders" (5).¹⁷

The aggressive hero also signifies an alternative to the Garrisonian abolitionist moral suasion accompanied by the doctrines of no-violence, disunion, and no voting, the latter two of which aim to keep "innocent" northerners away from being contaminated by the evil of the southern slavery through political activities or connections. From the year 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Law passed the Congress to the time when *My*

Bondage and My Freedom was written, the conflict over the slavery issue between the North and the South had become so aggravated that the slightest provocation could touched off a war. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, above all, meant a virtual expansion of slavery in the name of “popular sovereignty”¹⁸ and brought about violent skirmishes between pro- and anti-slavery factions. Garrison’s moral suasion based on Christianity alone seemed unable to cope with the bloody Kansas. Influenced by Gerrit Smith who broke away from the Garrisonian group for more practical policies (Wald 77)¹⁹ and to whom this volume is exclusively dedicated, Douglass decidedly shifted towards more political Unionist ideology since the doctrine of disunion seemed to him to discard his suffering brethren in the South.

Grounded on the theory of the American Revolution, Douglass further asserts that slavery is un-American, that rebelling slaves are more American than the white people, more faithful to the Declaration of Independence, the very sacred document of American republicanism. He warns the southern whites, in the language of Jeremiad, against their divergence from the original spirit of the American document and the coming retaliation for their fall from the ideal. He remarks in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that the slaveholder is a “violator of the just and inalienable rights of man” (203; emphasis mine) whether he is kind or cruel and that he “never lisps a syllable in commendation of the fathers of this republic, nor denounces any attempted oppression of himself, without inviting the knife to his own throat, and asserting the rights of rebellion for his own slaves” (203). Whoever supports the system of slavery, Douglass thus affirms, is a traitor to the United States; it is the white majority, not the black protestants, that are deviated from the ideal republic. Using the metaphor of a double-edged knife thrust to the throat of the slaveholder, he, like a biblical prophet, warns a coming disaster. In the course of associating the slaves protesting against oppression more clearly with the revolutionary heroes, he makes his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, “an American book, for Americans” to use Smith’s phrase (35-36).

V. Novelization of the *Narrative*

In the letter inserted in the preface to the second autobiography, Douglass insists that he has never argued the slavery issue on a personal level alone, but rather for the universal humanity, and that this book is “not to illustrate any heroic achievements of man, but to vindicate a just and beneficent principle, in its application to the whole human family, by letting in the light of truth upon a system” (8). The universal aspect he stresses here indeed characterizes this volume when compared with the earlier one. If the *Narrative* is a story of Frederick Douglass who became a man from a “brute,” *My Bondage and My Freedom* is a story of how a man attains freedom out of bondage and how that process illustrates “becoming an American.” If the former is a book based on his past speeches made as a Garrisonian member, the latter is a more independent literary work that dramatizes his past experience as an American: it is a novelization of the *Narrative* (Edwards <2> xxix).

The more expanded and complex perspective involved in the 1855 autobiography is made possible by his experience of racism rampant even in the North. What is little described about racial discrimination in the free land in *the Narrative* is augmented in the next book, and the racial prejudice that was felt there is further magnified in contrast to scarce experience of racism in Britain, the land of monarchy. Douglass emphasizes this new experience of freedom of the color line, by repeating his bitter experience in democratic America of being turned away at the door of a church, a menagerie, a hotel, or a Lyceum: “We don’t allow niggers in here!” (277-79)

Just as he understood the real meaning hidden in the seemingly nonsense songs sung by his fellow slaves for the first time when he was outside of the circle in the North, so did he comprehend the truth of the slavery system and the profound meaning of his being an African American in the States when he was outside of his own country. Cultural distance and intellectual maturity gave him a global understanding of being a slave in America.

Douglass, however, makes great efforts never to give the reader the impression that his insights were suddenly given him by encountering

a new group of intellectual people or new culture and knowledge, but rather insists that they have gradually developed from what he had possessed as small sprouts within him. By doing so, he attempts to avoid the predominance of Anglo-Saxon culture and the binary schematization of benevolent northern whites and ignorant slaves who only receive the blessing. He, therefore, dates his religious awakening and the emergence of desire for freedom much earlier in his life in the second text than in the first. He even identifies his first public speech on the day when he began to harangue against slavery to his friends in the South long before meeting Garrison in 1841.

Literacy, too, was not given only by the guidance of the then angel-like Mrs. Auld, for he was bequeathed enthusiasm for knowledge by his mother, an African descendant, who could somehow miraculously manage to learn to read. Moreover, he seems to place less weight on literacy than he did a decade before, though he still believes the literacy is a strong weapon. Instead, he suggests as well that illiteracy, which was commonly equated with dispossessing Anglo-Saxon culture, means no utter ignorance, nor stupidity; he sheds more light upon slave culture.

The prolonged depiction of his grandmother and the addition of a few scenes of his mother serve to enrich the portrayal of his childhood. It is not the cherished memories of his family members alone that brings about the fertile sketch of a slave life in this text, but the incorporation of several episodes of nasty slaves, as well, like Aunt Katy, the privileged cook of his master, who would favor her own children and bully Douglass, giving him only scarce portion of food, or Uncle Isaac Copper who would whip slave kids just as slaveholders do because “[everybody], in the south, wants the privilege of whipping somebody else. . . . Slaves, as well as slaveholders, use it with an unsparing hand” (65-66). Sympathetic blacks and heartless ones, or wise blacks and cunning ones, altogether compose a tapestry of the slave world, a microcosm of humanity.

Similarly, Douglass refers to a few kind-hearted white characters like Mr. Kinney, an old Englishman at the windmill, who “always seemed pleased when he saw a troop of darkey little urchins, with their tow-linen shirts fluttering in the breeze, approaching to view and admire

the whirling wings of his wondrous machine” (66). From the viewpoint of the Englishman, he presents a vivid depiction of the exceptional affinity between the white man and the black kids transcending the color line. For the purpose to write the wholeness of a slave life, he portrays pleasing memories, too, despite the predominance of its wretchedness, taking the greatest care not to romanticize the slave culture, not to be incorporated into the common proslavery discourse that slaves are content. The following scene demonstrates the paradoxical richness of a slave life compared with that of a white child, which anticipates the world of Huckleberry Finn:

[The] first seven or eight years of the slave-boy’s life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted *white* children of the slaveholder. . . . He is never chided for handling his little knife and fork improperly or awkwardly, for he uses none. He is never reprimanded for soiling the table-cloth, for he takes his meals on the clay floor. He never has the misfortune, in his games or sports, of soiling or tearing his clothes, for he has almost none to soil or tear. He is never expected to act like a nice little gentleman, for he is only a rude little slave. Thus, freed from all restraint, the slave-boy can be, in his life and conduct, a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests. (44)

The irony and humor contained in this passage manifests one of the elements that characterize *My Bondage and My Freedom* and makes it more literary than the *Narrative*, parting from propagandistic, deploring tone and, thereby, from the conventional slave narrative. When he said in 1855 that the present would be remembered by future generations as “the age of anti-slavery literature” (Douglass <3> 361), Douglass was confident that his new book would contribute to American literature as well as to antislavery movement.

Notes

¹ The first issue of the *North Star* appeared in Dec. 1847. Douglass changed its name into *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in June 1851. William S. McFeely implies the editor's stronger sense of independence in the new appellation of the paper (<1> 169). As is discussed later concerning the title of his second autobiography, the possessive tone seems to announce his authorship and editorship.

² As for Stowe's letter to ask for Douglass's help, see Joan D. Hedrick (218).

³ McFeely briefly refers to this episode, suggesting that the black character Stowe might write is the reason for his negative reply (<1> 166). But it must have been probably more problematic for him that the white authoress would appropriate and interpret the details that he gives.

⁴ As for the background of Smith, see Edwards (<1> 369; <2> xxviii), and Wald (74).

⁵ Contrary to this view, McFeely, a biographer of Frederick Douglass, evaluates highest the *Narrative* which "seems to have simply sprang from a man who had been telling the same story in much the same language from the antislavery platform for four years," and states that the character and the plot remain unaltered in the later two autobiographies in spite of the difference in details because "speaking comes easier than writing for Douglass" (McFeely <2> 134).

⁶ Douglass calls his *Narrative* "my pamphlet" in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (272) and seems to differentiate it from the latter. This is suggestive of the differences between the two works.

⁷ David B. Blight points out that Douglass's description as to the identity of his father diminishes gradually through the three autobiographies; his repetition of the possibility that his father might be his master in the *Narrative* is reduced to the more uncertain tone since he is "shrouded in a mystery" in the second text, and he finally discards the possibility itself in the last text by stating bluntly, "Of my father I know nothing" (Douglass <4> 42; Blight's note).

⁸ McDowell applies a feminist approach to the *Narrative*, and puts special emphasis on Douglass as participant because "sexualization 'resides in the very act of looking'" (178).

⁹ Thomas Jefferson is opposed to slavery, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, chiefly because of its bad influence upon white children, and not for the sake of slaves themselves (168-69).

¹⁰ The only self-centered plantation mistress in this novel, Marie, insists

that “it’s we mistresses that are slaves, down here,” and that slaves are the “plague” of her life, while her slave was almost sleepless because of taking care of her (260-61).

¹¹ This reminds us of the gothic scene in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which Cathy threatens Legree by spreading a rumor of ghosts so that he would not approach the “haunted” attic.

¹² This scene might have influenced *Dred* by Stowe in which she describes a scene of camp-meeting where the proslavery minister Bonnie is critically watched by the heroine.

¹³ Harriet Jacobs, for example, introduces in her slave narrative a couple who were sold to a slave trader because they let others know who the father of the new baby was.

¹⁴ Douglass finally offers the details in his last autobiography. See Douglass <2> (197-214).

¹⁵ Good examples of this are James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* and one of the most popular scenes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that of Eliza’s crossing the Ohio River.

¹⁶ As for the details about the rebellion, see Robin Mac Donald and Sundquist (115).

¹⁷ This characterization of Madison Washington is similar to that of Dred. “The Heroic Slave” appears to have influenced Stowe, in turn, when she wrote her second antislavery novel, *Dred*.

¹⁸ This is the phrase Stephen Douglass used to support the Kansas-Nebraska Bill which advocates to let the residents decide whether their state will become a free state or a slave one.

¹⁹ As for the 1840 split of the Garrisonians, see Benjamin Quarles (42-56) and Ronald G. Walters (3-18).

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