Shattering Kidnapper's Heavenly Union: Interargumentation in Douglass's Oratory and *Narrative*

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When Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery in 1841, he became a popular abolitionist orator, electrifying Northern audiences with highly provocative denunciations of slavery. Responding to Douglass's attacks, white Southerners called him a liar, claiming that he knew nothing about slavery because he had never been a slave. As Douglass explained, "[T]his doubt being used to injure the anti-slavery cause, I was induced to set the matter at rest by publishing the narrative of my life" ("I Am Here" 40). Douglass's *Narrative* of 1845 established his status as a fugitive slave by specifying his personal history with various masters and supervisors in Maryland.

While the *Narrative* proved to everyone's satisfaction that Douglass had indeed been a slave, its publication precipitated another problem. Because the *Narrative* gave the name of the most recent "owner" from whom Douglass had absconded, that disclosure exposed him to possible recapture by that owner, who was legally entitled to his human "property." Seeking to elude possible slave catchers, Douglass fled the United States for the British Isles. As he explained to an Irish audience, "[I]t was thought better for me to get out of the way lest my master might use some stratagem to get me back into his clutches. I am here then in order to avoid the scent of the blood hounds of America [. . .]" ("I Am Here" 40).

Douglass returned to the United States after his supporters had purchased his freedom from his slave master. He resumed his oratorical career, hurling lightning bolts from one platform after another as he delivered a seemingly endless marathon of speeches. Beginning in 1847, he also published and edited the *North Star*, a popular abolitionist newspaper.

Narrative, then, is far more than a literary text that invites readers to explore its omissions, paradoxes, fissures, and ironies. It served as an incident in Douglass's antislavery crusade, a text that he produced to validate his ethos as an orator, and an interruption in his river of speeches. Like his hundreds of abolitionist addresses, his abolitionist newspaper, and his abolitionist novella of 1853, the *Narrative* existed for one major purpose: to convince Americans to dismantle slavery as soon as possible. Douglass's text exemplifies Walter Fisher's contention that narration can offer arguments at least as effective as rational appeals.

In appealing for abolition, Douglass constructed a large, extended system of argumentation—call it interargumentation—flexible enough to employ when speaking in countless lecture halls and when writing an autobiography. Thus, in approaching the *Narrative*, teachers and students must consider its resplendent

place within Douglass's larger rhetorical tapestry and its interargumentative relation to the rest of that tapestry.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., convincingly argues that Douglass arranges the first chapter of the *Narrative* through a fairly elaborate series of binary oppositions that he then dismantles (*Figures* 80–97). William L. Andrews notes that Douglass organizes the remainder of the *Narrative* through more binaries that remain stable (*To Tell* 123–38). Douglass relied on this structural vehicle because, as Fredric Jameson explains, binary opposition "generates an order out of random data" and can function as a "deciphering device" to help the mind "perceive difference and identity" as it confronts "a mass of apparently homogeneous data" (113, 117).

But Douglass does not simply deconstruct some binaries and pile up others. Rather, he generates interargumentative order out of data unfamiliar to Northerners by arranging many speeches and the *Narrative* according to the same commanding binary: True Christianity / False Christianity. He constantly pits True Christianity, which he explicitly embraces, against the False Christianity of racism and slavery.

Douglass wielded his commanding binary in a number of the extant speeches he delivered before the publication of the *Narrative*. For example, in "American Prejudice and Southern Religion" and "The Church Is the Bulwark of Slavery," he blasted Northern churches that defiled true Christianity by exercising racial discrimination during the Holy Eucharist. The celebration of the Lord's Supper was a sacred experience while racist violations were despicable manifestations of false Christianity. In "The Southern Style of Preaching to Slaves," he again decried false Christianity as he mockingly imitated slaveholders' sermons to slaves, lampooning slave masters' self-serving perversion of the Golden Rule.

In "Southern Slavery and Northern Religion," Douglass further exemplified the falsely Christian white South by relating his and other children's experiences that he would later include in the *Narrative*: the separation of children from their mothers; Douglass's and other children's eating from a trough; and the cruel abandonment of his aged and enfeebled grandmother by her slaveholder. In "My Slave Experience" he added accounts of cruel whippings and the story of Demby, a slave shot to death for refusing to submit to the lash—all of which would appear in the *Narrative*.

In long polemical passages that Douglass used as a dress rehearsal for later orations, the appendix of the *Narrative* instantiates and explains the commanding binary:

> [F]or, between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping,

> cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. [. . .] The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin [whip] during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday [. . .]. We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles [. . .]. (326–27)

In the appendix, Douglass also quotes lines that satirize slave masters' Christianity as "Kidnapper's heavenly union" (330).

Before reaching the appendix, Douglass skillfully weaves his governing binary into the body of the *Narrative*. One of his obvious strategies is to exemplify False Christianity by portraying sadistic slaveholders who served either as pastors or as prominent lay Christians. He reports that the church leaders Wright Fairbanks and Garrison West used force to disband his Sabbath school (288). The Reverend Daniel Weeden enjoyed whipping his slaves. Embracing the lash and Christianity with equal relish, the Reverend Rigby Hopkins, in Douglass's words, "could always find some excuse for whipping a slave" while "there was not a man any where round, who made higher professions of religion, or was more active in revivals [. . .]" (302, 303). After converting to Christianity at a camp meeting, Thomas Auld behaved more brutally toward Douglass and other slaves than he had previously (287). By depicting the unreligious William Freeland as his least objectionable supervisor, Douglass in effect argues that False Christianity is far worse than no religion at all (301).

The most despicable character in the *Narrative* is Edward Covey, "a class-leader in the Methodist church" who "sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God" (289, 292). The slaves, however, dubbed him "'the snake,'" for he would "crawl" around or remain "coiled up in the corner of the wood-fence" and surprise anyone unfortunate enough to pause briefly while working (291–92). As the perfect embodiment of False Christianity, Covey inverts all values, including those of the natural world: "The longest days were too short for him and the shortest nights too long for him" (293). The climax of the *Narrative* occurs when Douglass refuses to submit to Covey's whip and outwrestles the Satanic, snakelike overseer. In the *Narrative* all these examples are in contrast to Douglass's stated devotion to True Christianity and grateful references to Providence and the Almighty.

Structuring the *Narrative* through his chief binary is a brilliant strategy that enables Douglass to present himself simultaneously as an abolitionist and a radical church reformer. Like his earlier orations, the *Narrative* implicitly argues that not only do slaveholders systematically brutalize the workers who are building the South, they also invert true Christianity. Instead of simply ignoring Christmas, slave masters desecrate the hallowed day by encouraging slaves to drink excessively—a temptation to which many slaves unfortunately succumb, thereby helping to complete the inversion (299–300). Slaves again manifest their complicity by boasting to one another about their "owners," whom they actually disdain. Emancipation is necessary not only to relieve the degradation and

suffering of slaves but also to repeal the Southern inversion of True Christianity and thereby to save the white church, which is deeply implicated in slavery.

Why did Douglass extend in the *Narrative* the main binary that he had used in addresses? He did so to offer a perspective by incongruity that would shatter Northerners' piety.

Kenneth Burke declares that a "perspective by incongruity" violates "piety" or *"the sense of what properly goes with what"* (*Permanence* 74). Although "piety" usually denotes religious devotion, Burke uses it to indicate any powerful allegiance. Similarly, the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich defines faith as "ultimate concern" and argues that humans can vest their "ultimate concern" in such seemingly secular "gods" as "the nation" and "social success and economic power" (1–3). He explains that no matter how secular an ultimate concern might become, as long as people cling to it doggedly they are devoutly religious. In his words, "Idolatrous faith is still faith" (16). Explicating Burke, Julia Allen and Lester Faigley analyze the power of a perspective by incongruity to threaten piously held convictions:

> By juxtaposing incongruous ideas, Burke says, we "shatter pieties." In other words, by juxtaposing one ideological correctness together with another, of a different ideological stripe, the two call each other into question [. . . and] the piety will thus be "shattered." (162)

Burke claims enormous power for such rhetorical juxtapositioning by naming it "atom-cracking" (*Attitudes* 308).

In the *Narrative* Douglass juxtaposes Christianity—the great religion of Victorian America—and slavery, an institution that had long been sanctioned in the South and accepted by the North. He crashes together the ideological correctness of True Christianity and the presumed naturalness of slavery, putting audiences, who accepted Christianity as ultimate truth, in the position of having to reject slavery as its opposite. Whether Douglass in private subscribed to Christianity or (as Donald Gibson argues ["Faith"]) rejected it matters less than his spectacular rhetorical ability to marshal Christianity as a vehicle for shattering piety in his attack on bondage.

In teaching the *Narrative*, we locate it within Douglass's rhetorical tapestry. Students examine literary dimensions as part of Douglass's narrative argument, understand that narrative argument as part of his interargumentation, and visualize that interargumentation as a major contribution to the entire abolitionist project.

Following this approach, students can explore the literary ironies, fissures, contradictions, and omissions that Gates, Andrews, Gibson, David Van Leer, and others have spotted in the *Narrative*. We ask students whether—and in what way—the anomalies and destabilizing tendencies noted by recent critics advance or retard Douglass's polemic and whether they would have mattered to Douglass or his nineteenth-century audiences.

Our approach encourages students to consider what Deborah McDowell has illuminated: Douglass's reinscription of patriarchal authority, which appears to contradict his antebellum political support for women's rights. We ask students about Douglass's decision to shatter the piety of slavery while reinforcing the piety of the patriarchy. Do reformers succeed by shattering one piety at a time? Or do they need to assault racial and sexual oppression simultaneously? Could or should a nineteenth-century reformer have done so? How many—and which—fundamental social assumptions can reformers expect moderate audiences to reexamine at one time? We also ask students to consider whether Douglass was trying to cleanse Christianity in a manner similar to that of Martin Luther, as we contend, or whether he hated and rejected that religion, as Gibson claims ("Faith"), or indicted it, as SallyAnn Ferguson argues.

In addition, we note that the interargumentative binaries that structure Douglass's pre-*Narrative* speeches and his *Narrative* demand resolution; for, as Claude Lévi-Strauss maintains, "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution" (819). Unlike the storytellers whose work Lévi-Strauss investigates, however, Douglass could not possibly resolve his binary tensions as long as slavery continued to thrive. The structure of the *Narrative* remained incomplete because it depended on the "text" of national life.

After the *Narrative* appeared, Douglass sustained the binary tensions in his interargumentative tapestry even as he demanded their resolution. For example, in a February 1846 address in Scotland, he dramatically opposed slavery to Christianity as he urged the Free Church of Scotland to sever its ties with its affiliated American slaveholders:

> I [maintain] that man-stealing is incompatible with Christianity—that slaveholding and true religion are at war with each other—and that a Free Church should have no fellowship with a slave church—that as light can have no union with darkness, Christ has no concord with Beelzebub [. . .] and no man can serve two masters,—so I maintain that freedom cannot rightfully be blended with slavery. ("Free Church" 159)

Five weeks later, in another jeremiad delivered in Scotland, he tightened the lines to include virtually no explanation apart from the binaries:

> 'Tis the *Free* Church of Scotland, what free church and slave church opposites!—light and darkness, liberty and slavery, freedom and oppression, Bibles and thumbscrews, exhortations, and horsewhips, all linked and interlinked. ("Free States" 188)

Although these binaries were "all linked and interlinked" by slaveholders, such linkage represented the yoking of metaphysical opposites. Douglass shattered the piety of slavery by explaining that slave masters violated the nature of the universe.

Following the horrific 1857 *Dred Scott* decision of the United States Supreme Court, Douglass reviled the Court's decision as "an open, glaring, and scandalous tissue of lies" ("Dred Scott" 167). Recapitulating familiar incongruities, he assaulted slavery by invoking the Bible. He also generated a new binary, false resolution / true resolution, to ridicule the strenuous efforts to guarantee the permanence of slavery:

> Loud and exultingly have we been told that the slavery question is settled, and settled forever. You remember it was settled thirty-seven years ago, when Missouri was admitted into the Union with a slaveholding constitution. [. . .] Just fifteen years afterwards, it was settled again by voting down the right of petition, and gagging down free discussion in Congress. Ten years after this, it was settled again by the annexation of Texas . [. . .] In 1850 it was again settled. This was called a final settlement. [. . .] Four years after this settlement, the whole question was once more settled, and settled by a settlement which unsettled all the former settlements. The fact is, the more the question has been settled, the more it has needed settling. (166–67)

He argued that only one true resolution of slavery was possible—abolition. Other resolutions, including the newest "settlement," were false and would fail, just as the Missouri Compromise and subsequent false resolutions had failed. The failures were inevitable, despite brilliant leadership: "Clay, Calhoun, and Webster each tried his hand at suppressing the agitation [against slavery], and they went to their graves disappointed and defeated" (166).

In the same address he coined another new binary, past ignorance / present awareness, to celebrate abolitionists' success in shattering piety and to herald a massive, positive movement toward true resolution. He insisted that, despite the recent "hell-black judgment of the Supreme Court" (168), a gargantuan change was well under way:

> [Abolitionism] started small, and was without capital either in men or money. [. . .] There was ignorance to be enlightened, error to be combatted, conscience to be awakened, prejudice to be overcome, apathy to be aroused, the right of speech to be secured, mob violence to be subdued, and a deep, radical change to be inwrought in the mind and heart of the whole nation. This great work, under God, has gone on, and gone on gloriously. (165)

He elaborated:

> Politicians who cursed [abolitionism] now defend it; ministers, once dumb, now speak in its praise; and presses, which once flamed with hot denunciations against it, now surround the sacred cause as by a wall of living fire. (166)

Varying his well-tested, commanding binary and explaining the inevitable true resolution, Douglass claimed that bondage affronted God: "The Supreme Court of the United States is not the only power in this world. It is very great, but the Supreme Court of the Almighty is greater" (167). Chief Justice Taney "cannot reverse the decision of the Most High," for "God will be true though every man be a liar" (167, 168). Indeed the false resolution of the Supreme Court could paradoxically usher in True Christianity; for, in the *Dred Scott* case, the Court might be forging "one necessary link in the chain of events preparatory to the downfall and complete overthrow of the whole slave system" (168–69).

As symbolic action, Douglass's orations and his *Narrative* obviously served as earlier links in that same chain of events. But despite the progress toward abolition, Douglass's interargumentative rhetoric by incongruity—including his speeches and the *Narrative*—still remained incomplete and unresolved. He could not possibly ease his interargumentative tensions, moving from an awareness of oppositions toward their resolution, until slavery ended.

But in February 1863 Douglass responded to the Emancipation Proclamation by deeming it "the greatest event of our nation's history" ("Proclamation" 549). For anyone, saluting Lincoln's edict meant saluting the end of slavery. For Douglass, applauding the edict also meant sewing the last stitch of his extended tapestry and, *finally*, resolving the binary tensions of his interargumentation. Only by publicly applauding Lincoln's act could Douglass note the end of the kidnapper's heavenly union and thereby complete his interargumentative structure and conclude his *Narrative*.