

THE LANGUAGE OF BEING AND METAPHOR OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S NARRATIVE

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(Resumen)

La autobiografía presenta el dilema entre el hombre que posee un "yo" trascendental que se expresa por medio del lenguaje y entre el hombre que se crea a sí mismo y establece relaciones con otros hombres a través del lenguaje. Es el lenguaje el que genera el significado del mundo, ayuda al hombre a expresarse y actúa como espejo de quienes somos y cómo hemos elegido ser. En la autobiografía de Frederick Douglass el "yo" podría manifestarse a través de metáforas de la vida diaria y la autobiografía sería un ejemplo de la metáfora del "yo". Pero la transformación del protagonista de la ignorancia a la alfabetización le hace sentir que posee un "yo" o un "ser", y el uso de un lenguaje metafórico nos muestra un "yo" con ansias de libertad y consciente de su estado de esclavitud. El "yo", por tanto, no está por entero sujeto a metáforas y no se realiza del todo a través del lenguaje porque es un proceso de desarrollo sujeto al tiempo y al continuo desarrollo del mundo. Douglass crea con la autobiografía un "yo" ficticio basado no sólo en verdaderos hechos biográficos sino también un "yo" que representa a toda una raza. La autobiografía a través del lenguaje y la cuestión a tratar postula un "yo" colectivo y representativo que quiere llamar la atención del lector y atraer su simpatía.

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The autobiographical act could be said to be the exemplar of a long time debate about whether human beings possess a transcendental Self given expression by language, or whether human beings create themselves and function with others through language. The autobiography, which has been viewed as a written record of verifiable biographical facts of one's life, seems like a testing ground of a rhetorical presentation of a historical Self where one either tries to capture and confined in the pages of a hard bound copy called, *My Entire Life in Three Hundred Pages*, a transcendental Self that is neither totally capturable nor confineable but as Gunner states "displays...itself by means of language;"

or, on the other hand, a Self that is preceded by language and moves through it to unfold and un-conceal itself and reality. Similar to the Chicken vs. the Egg controversy, the dilemma about the Self vs. Language will no doubt be endless, so why venture to write an autobiography when the Self is elusive, and for some critics like Paul De Mann, nonexistent?

In James Olney's *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, he believes that the self is evidenced in the metaphors man appropriates or accesses in his everyday life, and that the autobiography is one more example of a metaphor of the self, but not a complete recollection of it but which language fluidize to the Self. Olney's concept of the metaphors of self is a useful concept when we look at *Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself*. Within the Douglass's autobiography he recreates a historical self and the collective spirit of the race by knowing the specular metaphors that express his deepest sentiments about his freedom, the freedom of black people, the horrors of slavery and enlightenment. However, Olney's view cannot be taken alone in order to fully explain Douglass's acquisition of literacy within his narrative, which I will discuss in a moment.

Like many other slave narrators, Douglass recounts not only his physical flight from slavery to freedom but he also recounts his intellectual flight or transformation from illiteracy to literacy. This movement from ignorance to knowledge seems to be one of the most liberating and central experiences of his life, because at the moment of comprehending the necessity to be literate fostered a newly realized notion of what it was to truly possess a Self or Being. After hearing Mr. Auld forbade his wife to continue to teach Douglass how to read, Douglass writes:

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom (49).

Douglass had lived as a slave for less than 10 years now, and he still was unable to fully grasp the state of his existence until it was articulated to him. He knew, as a human being, he was participating in a half-life, but up until that point he like many other slaves were socialized to participate into a class and race based system governed by coercion. Until he heard the words that "explain(ed) dark and mysterious things" he

was participating in a pseudo event (Cottom, 3). Of course, he was less than 10 years old at this time, but by the time he moved to Master Thomas's plantation and was under the direction of Mr. Covey, Douglass was "tamed" and his "body, soul, and spirit" were shrouded in oppression. He writes:

Sunday was my only leisure time. I spent this in a sort of beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake. . . At times I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul . . . and then vanish. I sank down again, mourning my wretched condition . . . My suffering on this plantation seems now like a dream rather than a stern reality (75).

I say pseudo event or experience to mean that even though he thought he should possess freedom and be given the right to claim his humanity, Douglass did not possess the ability to discern or judge the true state of freedom or its structure unless he possessed the literacy to experience it. Only those ascribed humanity were perceived to be in the position to experience fully what it was meant to be literate and what it meant to be free. For Douglass to now recognize that his distinction as a slave and Mr. Auld as master was evidenced not in each's innate claim to humanity but in the literacy each possessed to participate in a structured realm of self. Douglass writes that "[His master's wish not to have Douglass read] gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read," (51) and that was "It would forever make unfit him to be a slave" (49).

Literacy in this case is knowledge that enables an individual to demystify and recontextualize personal and social realities in order to revision or resee these realities and think critically about them and eventually formulate an action. Yet, the key to demystifying reality and thinking critically about personal and social realities requires a mastery of language (Paulo Freire). Martin Heidegger's notion that "[language] is the very dimension in which human life moves, that which brings the world to be in the first place. Only where there is language is their 'world,' in the distinctively human sense" (Eagleton, 63). In other words, the very act of language generates and activates the meaning we wish to project in the world that absorbs it and reinterprets it as partly its own and in turn constitutes our lives. Douglass was having a transformation that reconstituted his life only after seeing the mechanism that would ensure its fruition. The consequences for those who can participate in the interface may have a bearing on the world; therefore, language is not only the tool that enables us to express ourselves, but

also acts as a mirror that shows us who we are and how we have chosen (or may not have chosen) to define ourselves in our mind's eye and in the eye of our fellow human.

The realization that slaveholders encouraged their slaves to be thoughtless would in fact make them to some degree personless or Being-less, so that they would "detect no inconsistencies in slavery" and believe that "slavery is right" (104). Douglass was unable to put into words or explain what he believed to be "dark and mysterious things." Previous to this experience Douglass was unable to discern and locate the hidden key--literacy--that impaled his separation and suppression. The ability to formulate an opinion or evaluate his situation was nonexistent for Douglass, and in terms of this rationale, Pattison's view that language is "the ubiquitous first cause of the mind . . ." (22). Pattison goes on to say that because "I am able to say 'I think, therefore, I am,'" causes the *cogito* to structure itself via rhetorical figures, give it order, and project that order on the world. Douglass was without "judgement" and according to Pattison, "The act of judgement, no matter how misguided or naive, is the first characteristic of literacy, and it precedes and embraces other forms of intelligence though it does not exhaust them" (23). The next step for Douglass, a step he did not take, was to reevaluate the arguments of his master against him acquiring literacy, and then formulate a strategy on how to acquire reading and writing skills. Consequently, he intellectually and actually actively engaged in defying his master's rationale to be literate by "desir[ing]" what he "dreaded," "hat[ing]" what he "loved," and "sought" what should be "shunned" (50). (One may say that he did this by compulsion, but certainly, the present state of affairs was not working and anything antithetical to that was a better option.) Further, Douglass tricked young, white boys into teaching him how to write his letters.

Olney's notion of the metaphors of self endorses the idea that the order and the structure of the transcendental self is a given, because human beings are innately endowed with the ability to give meaning to the elements externally (and internally) existing randomly in the universe. The self is an intentional self and posits man as the center of all animal kind. Olney writes:

The self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it now is before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we "know" the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorizing (188).

In the *Narrative*, Douglass constantly uses metaphorical and figurative language to project a Self that he believes is being ravaged by slavery, and needs to be salvaged by educating himself and freeing himself. The ship's release from the mooring and into the bay represents a Self longing to be free. Similarly the whipping post represents his need to be freed from physical bondage; and his indignation to be paid his full wages and acquire literacy represent his need for intellectual freedom; and the slave songs and the fight with Covey represent his need to be emotionally free. Even though the Self is evidenced through the metaphor and metaphORIZING, De Man writes:

To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute . . . To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are, like the Dalesman in the *Excursion*, deaf and mute--not silent, which implies the possible manifestation of sound at our own will, but silent as a picture, that is to say eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness (186).

I would say that the later sounds very grim, but the usefulness comes from the idea that the self is not a whole entity captured in a metaphor or even many metaphors. The totality or an essential self, the kind that Olney aspires, even though he admits the limitations of language, will never be fully realized through language because it is an evolving process of development subject to Time and the continual constitutiveness of the world. Further, an essential self does not indicate a self that is a product of time and the motion of the life; it just sits there ready to be expressed rather than being expressive.

Yet, there is another caveat. Can the slave narratives be treated like the autobiographies written by white counterparts? Are their purposes the same? Unlike white autobiographers, black autobiographers had a wider mission other than talk about themselves. Andrews states that "Afro-American autobiography addressed itself directly or indirectly to the proof of two propositions: 1) that the slave was, as the inscription of a famous anti-slavery medallion put it, 'a man and a brother;' 2) that the black narrator was, despite all prejudice and propaganda, a truth teller, a reliable transcriber of Southern life and black folk character" (Andrews, 4). The humanity of all black people, even the literate ones, had to overcome the mistrust of their predominantly white audience by being asked to produce narratives that could be verified or authenticated;

therefore, abolitionists required that black authors stick to biographical facts and posted letters of support at the beginning of all slave narratives. This was necessary in order to convince white Northerners of the horrors of the institution of slavery as recounted by a slave. However, black narrators overcame what Andrews called "positivistic epistemology" by speaking directly to "the Reader" and recounting actual travesties with their moral insight. White abolitionists were equally guilty of believing that the institution of slavery socialized slaves and freemen and women as to be morally culpable, and given some time, they would be as equally moral as all other persons. Within and without the abolitionist movement, blacks always had the assumption of falsity prevailing their existence as persons and as writers. On the other hand, white autobiographers were relieved of the excess burden to prove moral equality and the necessity "to invent their authenticity" (2). Andrews writes that black autobiographers would have been accused of "literary egoism that in a white autobiographer might be praised as American pride and self-reliance at its best" (2).

The purpose of a black autobiography seemed to be what Fredrick Jameson called a "symbolic act" or a "collective, class discourse" that related the collective, modal experience of black people. Douglass's *Narrative* relates events of his life, and it also records the commonality of his experience. He was in the writing business to not only emancipate himself but an entire race whom were illiterate and incapable of relating their experiences themselves.

Through autobiography Douglass creates a fictive self that is not based solely on verifiable biographical facts, but also, creating a self that embraces the collective spirit of black people (whose individual biographical facts he did not have) and shows how their lives have been constituted by treatment from white people and the written and social laws, and how the text reinstates them as human subjects to be reconstituted with moral fairness and judiciousness. Douglass's text does not "displaces" or acts as an imprisoning tool as De Man says, but as a liberating tool for a whole race. In other words, the autobiography has the attribute through its subject matter and its language to posit a representational, collective self as a *sine qua non* that resurrected an invisible race, and subsumed the institution of slavery that had become a system based on abstractions, principles bounding both slave holder and slave. Andrews writes that the autobiography was "a declarative act" (11). In addition to the autobiography in turn reconstituted its readers to illicit sympathy and support. So in a sense black people used rhetorical structures much like the mute pictures De Man speaks about, but not just to illicit sympathy, but to embed the polemics in the snapshot picture of the institution of

slavery and cause into being through language a reconstituted, triumphant life to bear on the world.

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