

Frederick Douglass: 'Transcending' Slavery

"Always now it is an object of beauty, however base its origin and neighborhood. . . . In its grub state, it cannot fly, it cannot shine,--it is a dull grub. But suddenly, without observation, the selfsame thing unfurls beautiful wings, and is an angel of wisdom." Emerson (249)

Ralph Waldo Emerson enumerates the deficiencies of passive knowledge consumption in his 1837 essay "The American Scholar." He argues for an *active* interaction with books and for the creation of an entirely *American* style of intellectual: "He is one who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart" (251). He is "Man Thinking," he is "an active soul" (244, 247). He is an American scholar. When Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* in 1845, as a black former slave, he was an unlikely person to assume Emerson's prescribed role. Ironically, however, chattel slavery, a fundamentally dehumanizing institution, forces Douglass to fully achieve the status of Man Thinking, which, according to Emerson, is the height of human intellectual evolution. Thus, like a grub becoming a butterfly, the American Slave becomes the American Scholar.

To become Man Thinking, according to Emerson, one must first get in touch with nature (245). As a slave routinely categorized with livestock, this connection is inescapable for Douglass. While intimacy with nature can be achieved through thoughtful reflection, á la Emerson, or base reduction, á la Douglass, the results are equivocal. In so doing, Emerson claims man "shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. . . . Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments" (245). Thus, understanding nature allows man to understand

himself and hold dominion over his own life; he can be no man's slave once he recognizes his intrinsic connection to nature, and through nature, his connection to every other human.

As there is no closer bond between man and nature than the transfiguration of slave to brute animal, Douglass is perfectly poised to don the mantle of Man Thinking. The former slave, in recollection of his childhood, is reduced to an element of nature, and even more sinisterly, a *commodified* element: "I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into the bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out" (1194). This slave child is depicted head-first in a feed sack, as if he is already meal fresh-ground from the mill, placing Douglass in the very midst of nature; he can be no closer bound. Continuing the reflection, he confides that when he was fed, he was fed like swine, in a "trough . . . upon the ground" (1194). The children of slaves were treated like livestock, a bucolic farm scene gone awry.

This conflation with nature continues throughout Douglass' narrative, deepening the connection. Douglass describes a slave auction with the same twisted pastoral imagery as the children eating: "We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination" (1202). Men are inspected for their ability to plow fields, women for their ability to produce milk and meat, and the children, the children are faceless swine on which owners can only speculate about future profits. Douglass becomes one with nature in a way that a free, white man never could.

His mind primed by an intrinsic connection to nature, this common slave is poised for the next phase of Emersonian soul activation: A mind for the past, best found through books (246).

Even more significant than simply acquiring facts, Emerson implies, exploring the past through books allows the reader to offer valuable commentary on the present, in order to create a narrative for the present in relation to the past. In other words, *active* reading is applying past history to present circumstances and letting the world know a new *truth*. Emerson explains, “The scholar of the first age received into him the world; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him—life; it went out from him—truth” (246). The books are no good at all if the reader does not apply the material to the world and relay new knowledge.

Emerson expounds upon the dangers of not creating new knowledge, of becoming too bookish, and concludes that books are simply a tool in the quest to become Man Thinking. He claims books “are for nothing but to inspire” (247). They are only useful to inspire man to reach for truth in the world, a journey leading to an active soul, the ultimate tool for achieving freedom (247). Emerson asserts that all men are capable of achieving this freedom: “The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man” (247). Most of Emerson’s audience at the time of the lecture certainly did not consider slaves capable of attaining such intellectual freedom.

Douglass, however, proves to be wholly capable of achieving an active soul through his use of books as inspiration to escape his bondage. Initially, books inform Douglass of the depravity of his enslavement. When his mistress seeks to teach him to read, his master interrupts her, saying, as relayed by Douglass, “‘if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave’ These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering and called into existence an

entirely new train of thought” (1196). Now, the child, Douglass, knows his state is just as unnatural as he has always sensed. He finally understands the depth of discordance between man’s natural connection to other men, something he feels intrinsically, and the deep divide produced by chattel slavery.

This fresh knowledge spurs him to closely examine his environment and study human enslavement. Later, as he dwells on the newfound information, applying it to his life just as Emerson says should be done, he despairs:

[J]ust the thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled “The Columbian Orator.” . . . These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for lack of utterance. . . . The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. (1199)

Reading *Columbian Orator*, about a slave and master relationship, allows Douglass to articulate the depravity of his master and mistress; unfortunately, it does not show him the way to relieve his torment. Douglass laments, “It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. . . . The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness” (1200). Forced to become one with nature, deprived of his liberty, and educated by books, Douglass is pure, active soul frustrated within its chains. Though he is at this point unsure of the course, the books have inspired him to take action towards final liberation.

Douglass' subsequent movements constitute the last step in becoming Man Thinking, which, according to Emerson, is using what one has learned and taking action to produce change. Emerson says, “[a]ction is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet a man” (248). Douglass cannot become a man, free and independent, without taking action to change his enslavement. Because he has activated his soul, he feels he must act or die. His resolution begins from the moment he learns to read, but escalates when he encounters a free Irishman who laments over Douglass' sorry state. Douglass says, “from that time I resolved to run away” (1201). Though he plans to run away, he is continually thwarted in his ability to concretely plan an escape.

Later, Douglass can see his future life strangled in the vise of chattel slavery and can bear it no longer, and his urgency is renewed for purposeful action. Douglass explains, “I was fast approaching manhood, and year after year had passed, and I was still a slave. These thoughts roused me—I must do something” (1219). He concludes, “I should prefer death to hopeless bondage” (1220). His determination is rewarded and his actions, ultimately, successful. Douglass recalls, “The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York” (1230). In his subsequent freedom, he writes his story, fulfilling the final caveat for the importance of books—the creation of one. His entire autobiography is a re-description of action undertaken due to inspiration derived initially from books. He could not be a better standard-bearer for Emerson's concept.

Succeeding in the face of his oppressors, Douglass writes his path to true, Emersonian freedom. At the end of his narrative, Douglass is an independent Man Thinking, trusting in his

faculties and his inherent connection with nature. Emerson declares, “In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be,—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom” (252). Douglass is no longer restrained by the specific definition of freedom, which has haunted his life, white versus black, North versus South. He knows he has always been a free man and thus denies slavery its power over him, dealing it a devastating blow. This move is perfect, as Emerson concludes, “The world is his who can see through its pretension. What deafness, what stone-blind custom, what overgrown error you behold, is there only by sufferance,—by your sufferance. See it to be a lie, and you have already dealt it its mortal blow” (252). Because he started his life as a slave child, conceived of no higher value than a piglet, full of unrealized potential in the marketplace perhaps, but with no inherent value of his own, Douglass sees the lie that is chattel slavery. He knows man is connected to man under divisive skin colors, and he refuses to be determined by this falsehood. Rather than ironic, it is perfectly fitting that a nation itself born, at least economically, from the systematic rape of one race of people by the other, should give birth to a mixed-race man embodying Emerson’s American Scholar.

Works Cited

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