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Bound by "the Principles of 1776": Dilemmas in Anglo-American Romanticism and Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*

The publication of Frederick Douglass's 1853 historical novella *The Heroic Slave* based on Madison Washington's 1841 slave uprising onboard the *Creole*, a U.S. slave ship bound for New Orleans, came just two years after his change of opinion on the pro-slavery character of the United States Constitution. This change in Douglass's interpretive approach to the document was marked by two literal and very public shifts in allegiance: the first was from William Lloyd Garrison's radical, yet non-violent, abolitionism to Gerrit Smith's reformist abolitionism, which was more capacious in its thinking regarding the means by which slave liberation could be achieved; and, following from the first, Douglass's second shift in allegiance saw him go from a principled skeptic of the Revolutionary ideals that supposedly lay at the foundations of the American Union, to a forceful, though I believe strategic, defender of the Revolutionary principles the vast majority of nineteenth-century Americans believed to be enshrined in the Constitution. Whereas Douglass previously, and Garrison still, saw an irreparable flaw in those foundational principles given the Constitution's legalization and martial defense of slavery, Douglass now saw in the Constitution a document in reconcilable contradiction with its preamble, the aspect of the document in closest sympathy with the Declaration of Independence and the best illustration, he and Gerrit Smith believed, of the true intents, aims, and aspirations—the spirit—of the law. Douglass now believed that the Constitution "might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes avowed in its preamble."[1]

1. "Change of Opinion," in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writing*, ed. Philip Foner, abridged and adapted by Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 173–74.

Strikingly, Douglass's dilemma over how best to accomplish abolition/change in society places him solidly within a transatlantic Romantic tradition profoundly shaped by what I call the reform-revolution dialectic produced by the late eighteenth-century debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine over the significance of the French Revolution. This debate, I argue, had aesthetic and political consequences for expressions of national attachment and detachment that also may be observed in the way Douglass proffers an attachment to national ideals and foundational principles rooted in revolutionary violence as the justification both for Madison Washington's liberation struggle, and for viewing him, as his name invites, interchangeably with the founding fathers, whom the nation's white consensus recognized as heroes.

The sympathetic turn towards familiar national symbols and the decision to promote, rather than dispel, national romance is just as much an aesthetic choice as it is a political one. And William Wordsworth features just such a choice regarding his disillusionment with the French Revolution, and the normative critique of national life that served as its inspiration, in the increasingly counter-revolutionary 1805 and 1850 versions of his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, the latter version published posthumously and the only one known to the nineteenth-century public. Once a Jacobin, Wordsworth had been England's poet laureate at the time of his death in 1850, and in many ways his poetry had come to be considered national poetry.[2] While I am indebted to and align myself with James Chandler's pace-setting work on Burke's influence on Wordsworth's poetics in *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*, my distinct contribution to this area of inquiry builds on his work by reading Wordsworth through the lens of the *debate* Burke and Paine had over the significance of the French Revolution, which not only construed reform and revolution as dialectical narratives of change, but also as the central dilemma for the construction of one's worldview, a choice that promised to impact the very nature of one's everyday sympathies and attachments.

More than merely a Burkean turn in thought, Wordsworth's change of opinion on what forms of attachment and/or detachment to praise and/or vilify provides insight into his self-conscious interpolation into the reform-revolution dialectic produced by the debate over the significance of the French Revolution, and, I argue, both advances a sense of and makes the persuasive case for a sympathetic ethics, that is, a sense of propriety regarding "sympathetic identification" (to invoke a philosophical concept

2. For a penetrating study of Wordsworth's status as a national poet in conversation with Burke, see Chandler's *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

popularized by Adam Smith in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759]) that includes forms of attachment comprising the subjectivity of persons best suited to both the institutionally preferred commitment to radical continuity over radical discontinuity and pre-existing forms over new ones built upon the creative destruction of the old. In resituating his own concern for the world within the context of the familiar, Wordsworth produces a form of Romanticism that simultaneously cultivates and ministers to the soul of the modern liberal subject, and the preference for reform—change as restoration—over revolution—change as rupture. In this light, Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, and his own public change of opinion from the normative critique of the "form" of American national life to subsequently becoming its sympathetic champion, not only presents us with the opportunity to observe his participation within a wider Anglo-American conversation *cum* predicament over the dialectical choice between reform and revolution, but also with an opportunity to observe some of the ways a distinct and influential form of Romanticism worked to establish the poetics of modern Anglo-American political thought.

In *Political Romanticism*, Carl Schmitt describes the central tension of the post-French Revolutionary moment as "Humanity as the revolutionary demiurge, history as the conservative demiurge."[3] And it is out of this metaphysical conflict, he argues, that Romantic aesthetics and politics emerge in late eighteenth-century Europe. I believe that the Burke-Paine debate over the significance of the French Revolution is well accounted for by Schmitt's description. Before engaging in a more detailed discussion of the ways that Wordsworth's shift from a revolutionary ethos to a counter-revolutionary and conservative one both prefigures Douglass and comes to be understood as reformist, we need to better understand how the debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine over the significance of the French Revolution illustrates the rhetorical stakes of those shifts.

The Burke-Paine debate is best exemplified in their respective period pamphlets, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and *Rights of Man* (1791), where each thinker provides numerous examples of the types of ideological investments described by Schmitt. In Burke's *Reflections*, history is indeed presented as the conservative demiurge, and morbidly so at that, such as when he claims on behalf of the English people, "We know that *we* have made no discoveries; and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born, alto-

3. Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1986), 59.

gether as well as they will be after the grave has heaped its mould upon our presumption, and the silent tomb shall have imposed its law on our pert loquacity."[4] Importantly, history here is not represented as an ongoing process but rather as something to which deference and submission is owed. The successive creative contributions of the living to the fabrication and interpretation of ideas of morality and principles of government has no demonstrative creative role in the making of English social reality for Burke. The role of the living, Burke says later, is to cultivate their sense of historical "prejudice":

> I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence.[5]

Burke's alignment of historical prejudice with ideational permanence rests on a notion that the role of the living is to establish a romance with the dead, or, put another way, to include what the dead also leave behind (i.e. ideas, objects, and institutions) in establishing a romance with that which precedes the living.

In his *Rights of Man*, however, Paine's response to Burke rejects the characterization of the living in terms of their duties, preferring instead to characterize them in terms of their rights:

> That which a whole nation chooses to do, it has a right to do. Mr. Burke says, No. Where then *does* the right exist? I am contending for the right of the *living*, and against their being willed away, and

4. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1986), 182.

5. Burke, *Reflections*, 183.

> controuled and contracted for, by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead; and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living.[6]

Whereas the sovereignty of history was the hero of Burke's romance, the sovereignty of the living is Paine's, a romance that proves to be greatly influential on the poetics of the second generation of English Romantics' political thinking, Shelley and Byron in particular. What is underscored here and throughout Paine's text is that he and Burke possess two fundamentally different visions of the social world and its possibilities. "Permanence" is what governs the sympathetic ethics that result from Burke's way of viewing people, objects, ideas, and institutions, whereas for Paine, it is "change":

> The circumstances of the world are continually changing, and the opinions of men change also; and as government is for the living, and not for the dead, it is the living only that has any right in it. That which may be thought right and found convenient in one age, may be thought wrong and found inconvenient in another. In such cases, Who is to decide, the living, or the dead?[7]

This conflict between change and permanence, the living and the dead, that we see in Burke and Paine provides us with a sense of the actual polemical stakes of the dialectic Schmitt describes involving the "revolutionary demiurge" and the "conservative demiurge."[8] Now, the metaphysical choice between "humanity" and "history" can be further understood as a choice between commitments to two differing temporalities for both viewing the world and envisioning ways of problem solving within it. And in the wake of the French Revolution these dialectical temporalities go on to restructure the terms of what kinds of change are thought possible on both sides of the Atlantic.

Before the Anglo-American and, more widely, the European debates over the significance of the French Revolution, the words reform (or reformation) and revolution were often used interchangeably to suggest a restoration of form or a return to a previous state of affairs. This particular usage of terms was in fact a reflection of the contemporary socio-political thought across Europe codified in large part by figures such as the Florentine political thinker Niccolò Machiavelli in the sixteenth century, which dictated that those who hoped to acquire and/or maintain sovereignty

6. Thomas Paine, "Rights of Man," in *Collected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 438–39.
7. Paine, "Rights of Man," 441.
8. Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 59.

should do so by emphasizing their continuity with previous forms of rule and ruling persons. As J. G. A. Pocock instructs us in his magisterial account of how Florentine political thought helped to shape the Anglo-American republican tradition, Machiavelli's line of thought was part of a long Classical and early modern tradition that viewed general temporality as comprising sacred and secular time. Humans entered into the latter, it was believed, at their departure from Eden, while God, the governing authority of sacred time, was eventually and triumphantly to bring secular time to an end. However, there remained one salient problem: how best should one spend time in the meanwhile? This dilemma gives rise to a robust literature seeking to discover the best forms of government to help humans realize their individual and collective virtue until the end of secular time—a form of virtue and a political idea that would come to be referred to in Europe as "civic virtue," and as a political tradition called civic republicanism.[9]

In the wake of the French Revolution, however, socio-political change began to be characterized as either continuous or discontinuous with a pre-existing state of affairs. In fact, one could argue, as I have elsewhere, that "the ensuing debate about the significance of the French Revolution had as much or more to do with this new temporality of socio-political change as with any of the material changes in government the French Revolutionaries . . . were calling for."[10] "Revolution" came to mean a discontinuous change that sought to disrupt pre-existing ideological and institutional attachments to establish a new order, whereas "reform" came to mean a continuous change that sought to renovate pre-existing ideological and institutional attachments to improve but preserve the existing order.[11] Importantly, the dialectical re-articulation of these two terms within the Atlantic republican tradition's ongoing conversation about the importance of civic virtue meant that the temporality of reform became the preferred mode of

9. See part three of Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

10. Kelvin C. Black, "How the Legal Shapes the Real: The Trans-Atlantic Possibilities of Collective Action in Nineteenth Century Britain and the United States," *The International Journal of Civic, Political, and Community Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 1–6, 3.

11. It is important to note that in the immediate moments of the turn in governmental and public opinion against the French Revolution, "reformer" was a pejorative term for anyone seeking to criticize the country's institutions. Though the conceptual framework for a favorable comparative assessment of the term "revolutionary" was put in place by the Burke-Paine debate over the significance of the French Revolution, the reform-revolution dialectic really took on lexical and cultural life in the years after the Napoleonic wars. For more on this fascinating history of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century shifts in socio-political semantics, see Joanna Innes's "'Reform' in English public life: the fortunes of a word," *Rethinking the Age of Reform*, eds. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71–97.

change for defenders of permanence and stability, but also became a form of change that was demonstrably counter-revolutionary. Official steps were taken in both Britain and the United States after the French Revolution to make this counter-revolutionary ethos authoritative with the passage of various anti-sedition proclamations and laws.[12] The goal of these actions in both countries was to resituate the terms and behavior indicative of institutional and constitutional loyalty and attachment. It is in this immediate socio-political context that Wordsworth undergoes his change of opinion on the viability of revolutionary change, and the normative critiques that inspire them; for Douglass, it is this pre-figurative socio-political context that I believe also structures his change of opinion on the pro-slavery character of the Constitution, and the need for national reconstitution of the American Union (read: the need for a new Constitution) in order to abolish slavery, and, along with it, the moral sensibility that made it possible for African slavery to become an integral part of the nation's socio-political and economic foundations.

Burke's influence on Wordsworth's aesthetic and ethical sensibilities can be seen acutely in the various stages of revision of Wordsworth's magnum opus of development, diminishment, and recompense, *The Prelude*.[13] The most extreme instance of this influence is seen in the final version of the poem published in 1850. Wordsworth exclaims at the beginning of a stanza in book 7, "Genius of Burke!"[14] and then proceeds to praise the man, whom he once sharply disagreed with over the significance of the French Revolution, as one who "forewarns, denounces, launches forth / Against all systems built on abstract rights," who "the majesty proclaims / Of Institutes and Laws, hallowed by time," and who "Declares the vital power of social ties / Endeared by Custom; and with high disdain, / Exploding upstart Theory, insists / Upon the allegiance to which men are born."[15]

The 1805 version of the poem, unknown to the nineteenth-century public, offers a subtler instance of Burke's influence on Wordsworth's political psychology. The poet, once a fervent Jacobin and participant in the early days of the revolution in France, represents himself now as changed:

12. In an attempt to suppress enthusiasm for the French Revolution at home, Britain and the United States both passed new sedition laws. In 1792 in England, King George III issued the Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings and Publications, and in 1795 Parliament passed what came to be known as the Two Acts: The Seditious Meetings Act & the Treason Act. And in 1798 the United States government issued the Alien and Sedition Acts.

13. The meta-narrative of the three canonical versions of the poem produced in 1799, 1805, and 1850 also follow this trajectory.

14. William Wordworth, *The Prelude*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 255.

15. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), 7:523–24, 525–26, 527–30.

> sanguine schemes,
> Ambitious virtues, pleased me less; I sought
> For good in the familiar face of life,
> And built thereon my hopes of good to come.[16]

As Chandler suggests, Wordsworth's shift away from his socio-political sympathies with the French Revolution can and should be seen as a shift away from mass politics. Central to the French Revolution was the decentralization of power away from the aristocracy and clergy, and its recentralization in "the people." And this was to be carried out through collective action, a "scheme," which Wordsworth, now on the other side of the Terror, artfully calls "sanguine," calling to mind both senses of the word: optimistic and bloody. He chooses instead to transform his erstwhile collectivist political vision into a personal search for "good" in "the familiar face of life," which I take to mean a kind of reading of the past into the everyday. This search, we are told, ultimately was to become the new foundation and governor of his "hopes of good to come," and what we are then left with is a present and a future constrained by the combined limitations of the self and the past.

Frederick Douglass makes the transition from asserting "The Right to Criticize American Institutions," as his 1847 speech is called, to asserting the right to be considered an American citizen in *The Heroic Slave*, published just six years later. The actual change of opinion leading to the shift in Douglass's politics was published in 1851 in his newspaper *The North Star*.[17] I have discussed at length elsewhere the possibilities and implications for nineteenth-century abolition and the social inclusion of blacks within American democracy.[18] And though a range of scholars has discussed *The Heroic Slave* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,[19] what has yet to be

16. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), 12:65–69.

17. Douglass, "Change of Opinion," *The North Star*, 15 May 1851; reprinted in the *Liberator*, 23 May 1851.

18. Kelvin C. Black, "Frederick Douglass' Differing Opinions on the Pro-Slavery Character of the American Union," *Qui Parle* 16, no. 1 (2006): 145–69.

19. See Robert B. Stepto, "Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave," *Georgia Review* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 355–68; Richard Yarborough, "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 166–88; Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 173–97; Stanley Harrold, "Romanticizing Slave Revolt: Madison Washington, the *Creole* Mutiny, and Abolitionist Celebration of Violent Means," in *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, eds. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 89–107; Ivy G. Wilson, "On Native Ground: Transnationalism, Frederick Douglass,

addressed is, as stated at the outset, the important ways in which Douglass's well-documented encounter with what I call the reform-revolution dialectic participates in an Anglo-American political tradition that, in the wake of the French Revolution, established a Romantic sympathetic ethics for both poles of the reform-revolution dialectic—an ethics in which continuity in forms, and human attachment to them, marked a limit to the horizons of possibility for good governance and human sociality; and discontinuity in forms, and human detachment from them, became popularized as a way/means to critique and undermine the authority of existing forms, expanding the horizons of possibility both for new forms of government, and, through them, for new attachments to new civil societal forms, all potentially resulting, it was believed, in new ways of being in the world.

Relying, I believe, on Wordsworth's Burkean sympathetic ethic of familiar attachment, *The Heroic Slave* does away with a reconstitution effort rooted in the normative critique of national foundations, choosing instead to reframe the radical anti-slavery call for a revolutionary solution within the constraints of the nation's pre-existing revolutionary origins. This reframing, I further contend, results in the simultaneous conflation of the struggles of Madison Washington, the novella's enslaved protagonist, with the struggles of the nation's founders, and of anti-slavery principles with the more general liberatory principles American colonists declared in 1776. In effect, the anti-slavery revolution had already occurred if one's sympathies were properly aligned with the nation's traditions and institutions of freedom. Whereas Douglass previously argued that the formation of those liberatory principles in the presence of the institution of slavery indicated that their concept of freedom was fundamentally in error, he now seems to argue that the continued existence of the institution of slavery was, in fact, an act of faithlessness to the nation's traditions and institutions of freedom. I have described these two differing anti-slavery perspectives as the Garrisonian position and the preamble position, because the latter emphasizes the universal humanism in the Constitution's preamble as the surest guide to the moral character of American institutions.[20] Famously, the Garrisonians claimed to agree with American slave holders that one had only to look at the actual letter of the law to see that American institutions were designed with the viewpoint that Africans, whether free or

and "'The Heroic Slave,'" *PMLA* 121, no. 2 (2006): 453–68; Christopher Michael Brown, "Seditious Prose: Patriots and Traitors in the African American Literary Tradition," *Law and Literature* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 174–212; and Carrie Hyde, "The Climates of Liberty: Natural Rights in the *Creole* Case and 'The Heroic Slave,'" *American Literature* 85, no. 3 (2013): 475–504.

20. Black, "Differing Opinions."

enslaved, and their descendants, whether free or enslaved, were never intended to be included in the body politic as citizens. The Supreme Court would later affirm this position in its 1857 decision on Dred Scott v. Sanford, where, as part of his decision for the majority, Chief Justice Taney provides a lengthy legal and social history detailing the explicit exclusion of "imported" Africans and their descendants from the body politic, stating that, "In the opinion of the court, the legislation and histories of the times, and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were then acknowledged as part of the people, nor intended to be included in the general words used in that memorable instrument."[21] And this, Taney concludes, is the perspective on the matter that prevailed when the Constitution was framed and adopted.

Additionally at odds with the historical record, from the standpoint of Douglass's former position on the pro-slavery character of the Union is his subsequent choice in *The Heroic Slave* to represent the slave uprising Madison Washington led on the *Creole*, a slave ship, through the sympathetic retelling of the ship's first mate. It is this character, given the fictional name Tom Grant, who declares his admiration for Washington to a group of pro-slavery detractors incredulous at the reports of "Negro courage" displayed during the uprising:

> I confess, gentleman, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference in action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior.[22]

Where once Douglass sought to criticize the contradiction of freedom and unfreedom in the nation's foundations, we see in this passage that he now has chosen to locate that contradiction in persons. The problem of African slavery and social inclusion in the United States, it would appear, has here become one of too little sympathy for the nation's foundational principles. Put another way, Douglass now calls for a restoration of the national form, its *re*form, as opposed to its revolutionary reconstitution.

Zephaniah C. Gifford[23] was the name of the actual first mate in charge

21. Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 19 How. 393 (1856): 408.
22. Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, in *Selected Speeches and Writing*, 246.
23. Though Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* features a fictionalized retelling of the slave insur-

during the slave uprising on the *Creole* on 7 November 1841, a rebellion that resulted in the liberation of approximately 130 slaves upon landing in the Bahamas.[24] The event touched off an international incident between the United States and Britain, with Secretary of State Daniel Webster, at the direction of President James Tyler, demanding either the immediate extradition of the slaves or compensation for the slave owners for their loss of property. It was Britain's position, however, that the slaves first gained their freedom by subduing their captors, and that upon their arrival in the Bahamas—an island under British rule and subject to the 1833 abolition of slavery throughout most of the British Empire—their freedom was merely guaranteed and safeguarded.[25] Here, too, in the legal dispute over the significance of the slave uprising on the *Creole*, the so-called principles of 1776 derived from the Declaration of Independence, namely the natural right to freedom from tyranny and its seizure through violent struggle, were being debated.

Much of the documented legal debate between the two countries over the *Creole* slave uprising was concerned with whether or not to call the incident a mutiny. A writer in an English law journal presents and answers the question in this way:

> In the first place, what is mutiny? It is the unlawful disobedience of the subjects of any state to the military or naval authorities lawfully placed over them. It is considered as a species of treason against the allegiance which every subject owes to the state to which he belongs, and is therefore punishable with great severity. Does the act of self-emancipation achieved by these negroes fall within the description? Did they owe allegiance to the United States? Have they violated the duty which, for benefits received and protection given, the law was entitled to demand from them? Is it possible to give any but negative answers to these questions? . . . In no respect whatever does their conduct even approach to the crime of mutiny. The law made by the Americans, declaring themselves entitled to have a property in the persons of the natives of another state, being a law opposed to all the settled and recognized principles of the law of nature and na-

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rection on-board the *Creole* by the ship's first mate, Douglass actually appears to use the deposition provided by the ship's overseer, William H. Merritt, as a basis for the depiction of aspects of the violent struggle that took place, and for a partial picture of Madison Washington's character. See *Senate Journal*, 27th Congress, 2nd session (20–21 January 1842), 51.

24. See *Senate Journal*, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., 51, for depositions taken from the crew of the *Creole* stating that 4 or 5 slaves chose to return to the U.S. as slaves.

25. The notable exceptions were "the Territories in the Possession of the East India Company," "the Island of Ceylon," and "the Island of Saint Helena."

> tions, must manifestly be an exceptional law, depending solely for its observance on the power of those who made it. Whenever therefore the power of force is successfully turned against the makers of the law, the law itself comes to an end. The objects of such an unnatural law are entitled at all times and under all circumstances to put an end to its operation. The moment they attain the power, they may exercise the right. The right itself is inherent in them, it may be subdued, but it cannot be destroyed, by superior force, it has an eternal existence, for it is in accordance with the eternal principles of nature and justice.[26]

The writer further explains that the position of the British government is that the relationship between American slaves and their captors is a "state of war," and, as such, the slaves' fight to free themselves cannot be viewed as an act of treason. Nor could any deaths that resulted during a slave uprising (1 crewman, 2 slaves were killed) be viewed as a crime.[27] Elaborating upon this point, the writer states that:

> If the Americans were not entitled to hold the negroes in slavery—if there was no law which bound the negroes to submit to such a state of things, it is clear that the Americans and the negroes were in a state of war with each other, a state in which their relations were to be decided by force, must be maintained by force. But if in a state of war, then it is clear that the means of obtaining or maintaining superiority are entirely in the discretion of either party. They are such as opportunity may suggest and afford, and no other. In such a case, the appeal to arms being the ultimate arbiter of the relative conditions of the parties, killing is clearly not murder. For murder is defined by all legal authorities to be a killing without lawful excuse.[28]

The entirety of this English legal thinker's disquisition on the occasion and the justification of slave uprising and revolutionary violence provides an interesting opportunity to broaden understanding of what the so-called principles of 1776 enshrined in the Declaration of Independence meant potentially in a larger transnational context, in as much as they align with certain Anglo-American traditions of freedom and natural rights. These conflicting understandings of when and where natural rights apply provide both the context and subtext for Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*. They also elu-

26. 27 Law Mag. Quart. Rev. Juris, "The Case of the Creole," 382–84.

27. Madison Washington is credited in the official depositions of the surviving crewman as having interceded to spare the lives of the *Creole*'s wounded captain and some of the other crew.

28. 27 Law Mag. Quart. Rev. Juris, "The Case of the Creole," 386.

cidate the stakes for remarks Douglass makes before his change of opinion on the incapacity of United States institutions to aid the cause of abolition, made in the aforementioned speech, "The Right to Criticize American Institutions":

> The only thing that links me to this land is my family, and the painful consciousness that here there are three millions of my fellow-creatures groaning beneath the iron rod of the worst despotism that could be devised, even in Pandemonium; that here are men and brethren, who are identified with me by their complexion, identified with me by their hatred of Slavery, identified with me by their love and aspirations for liberty, identified with me by the stripes upon their backs, their inhuman wrongs and cruel sufferings. This, and this only, attaches me to this land and brings me here to plead with you, and with this country at large, for the disenthralment of my oppressed countrymen, and to overthrow this system of Slavery which is crushing them to the earth. . . . I have not, I cannot have any love for this country, as such, or for its Constitution. I desire to see its overthrow as speedily as possible, and its Constitution shivered in a thousand fragments, rather than this foul curse should continue to remain as now.[29]

These remarks were made upon Douglass's return from Britain, where he had fled for a time to escape re-enslavement. The speech, made six years after the successful slave uprising on the *Creole* and the British government's stalwart protection of the self-emancipated slaves, is marked, not only by its lack of faith in and "love" for American institutions, but also by its profound doubts that the American people, given their flawed principles, will be able to summon the "moral sentiment," as Britain did, "sufficient to accomplish the work of renovation," and by its ambivalence over how best to effect a revolution.[30] For example, later in the speech, Douglass pointedly defends his right to have solicited Britain's military might to assist in the overthrow of the American government during his time there, but denies having ever done so.

Douglass's speech, just like the Anglo-American legal debate over the significance of the slave uprising on the *Creole*, makes it difficult to imagine how the American slave could legitimately feel anything but antipathy for the institutions and principles of his or her captors. And yet, Douglass's novella, written and published just six years after this speech, appears to do just that by encouraging the white American reader to view, as the character Tom Grant comes to do, the slave's struggle for freedom as a "familiar"

29. Douglass, "The Right to Criticize American Institutions," in *Selected Speeches and Writing*, 77–78.

30. Douglass, "The Right to Criticize," 78.

pursuit embodying the nation's highest ideals. Douglass's narrator interpolates Madison Washington's actual body into a tradition of American heroism:

> Let those account for it who can, but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson,—and who fought for it with a valor as high, and arms as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the chattel records of his native state.[31]

In keeping with Wordsworth's Burkean sympathetic ethic, as discussed earlier, reform or restoration of form is a way of seeing the world dependent on the belief in the fundamental soundness of foundations. And here, the reader is being invited to see many nationally affirming things with respect to Madison Washington, all of them gathered by the idea of the "familiar." I contend that in making Madison Washington a familiar object of patriotic affection, Douglass is attempting to domesticate the American slave's natural right to self-emancipation, thus making a potentially discontinuous historical act—the actual slave uprising Washington led on the *Creole*—continuous with a familiar national tradition vigilant in the preservation of collective freedom. The inclusion of Madison Washington's struggles in the collective, rather than their exclusion, not only intends to expand the concept of the collective for Douglass's readers, but also, importantly, allows them to invoke their love of country for doing so. And though a quote from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* precedes Tom Grant's second-hand account of the slave uprising—"Know ye not / Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow"—the case can be made that in the representation of Madison Washington throughout as a *representative* hero, one is given not a moody and vaguely indignant Byronic hero, but rather a charismatic and righteously indignant American hero. This style of heroism builds upon the aforementioned sympathetic ethics of continuity by not only confronting contradictions regarding the consistency of one's attachment to the principles of 1776, but also revealing them in others.

I have already investigated the effect Madison Washington's heroism had on the character Tom Grant in this regard. Before Grant, however, Washington's own self-scrutiny, with respect to the contradictory attachments to freedom and unfreedom that lay at the foundation of his being, proves to be persuasive for a character named Listwell who watches unobserved.

31. Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 220.

Over the course of a probing soliloquy on the state of his enslavement, Washington makes the transition from viewing himself as destined for enslavement to asserting his freedom in tones reminiscent of the Declaration of Independence. A brief illustration of this mental movement is as follows:

> [Birds] *live* free, though they may die as slaves. They fly where they list by day, and retire in freedom at night. But what is freedom to me, or I to it? I am a slave,—born a slave, an abject slave,—even before I made part of this breathing world, the scourge was plaited for my back; the fetters for my limbs. How mean a thing am I. . . . I am galled with irons but even these are more tolerable than the consciousness, the galling consciousness of cowardice and indecision. Can it be that I dare not run away? Perish the thought, I dare do anything which may be done by another. . . . No,—no,—I wrong myself, I am no coward. Liberty I will have or die in the attempt to gain it. . . . I have nothing to lose. If I am caught, I shall only be a slave. If I am shot, I shall only lose a life which is a burden and a curse. If I get clear, (as something tells me I shall,) liberty, the inalienable birth-right of every man, precious and priceless, will be mine. My resolution is fixed. *I shall be free*.[32]

Though largely an expression of internal conflict, Douglass presents Washington's ultimate reconciliation of his ideals with his actions regarding the "resolution" to pursue his freedom as a daring act of fidelity both to his own humanity and to the form of freedom articulated alongside the perilous revolutionary principle[33] that gave birth to the nation in the reference to "inalienable birth-right," a direct reference to the phrase "unalienable rights" in the Declaration of Independence.[34] And the phrase "the galling consciousness of cowardice and indecision," underscores how the narrative, under Washington's leadership, portrays both the commitment to freedom and its failure as a drama played out at the level of the conscience.

This interplay between one's commitments and one's conscience is also an integral part of the Wordsworthian sympathetic ethic, and is a particularly useful way to evaluate the representation of the character Listwell in the narrative. As his name would suggest, in Listwell Douglass implies that

32. Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 221–22.

33. The revolutionary principle asserted by the American colonists in the Declaration of Independence is a direct reference to the one first articulate by the English philosopher John Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) who thought revolution a natural right that each man possessed to make an ultimate "appeal to heaven" for authority sufficient to seek radical, and if necessary, violent change in government.

34. Though both terms mean the same thing, that which is unable to be transferred to another, in the usage "unalienable" Jefferson uses the English prefix "un-," while Douglass chooses to use the Latin prefix "in-" in "inalienable," the more popular usage in the nineteenth century.

"listening well" may not prevent one from also "tilting or deviating due to a loss of equilibrium," to invoke the term's nautical sense ("to list"). After overhearing Washington, Listwell declares, "I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land."[35] And indeed Listwell does help Washington effect his escape to Canada, when, after some intervening years, the latter happens upon his doorstep in Ohio. Afterward, however, back in a tavern in Virginia, Listwell refuses to reveal his anti-slavery sentiments in the presence of pro-slavery whites who believe that he is on his way to Richmond to purchase slaves. The narrator, allowing us access to Listwell's interiority, informs us that,

> While he would not avow himself a purchaser of slaves, he deemed it not prudent to disavow it. He felt that he might, properly, refuse to cast such a pearl before parties which, to him, were worse than swine. To reveal himself, and to impart a knowledge of his real character and sentiments would, to say the least, be imparting intelligence with the certainty of seeing it and himself both abused. Mr. Listwell confesses, that this reasoning did not altogether satisfy his conscience, for, hating slavery as he did, and regarding it to be the immediate duty of every man to cry out against it, "without compromise and without concealment," it was hard for him to admit to himself the possibility of circumstances wherein a man might, properly, hold his tongue on the subject. Having as little of the spirit of a martyr as Erasmus, he concluded, like the latter, that it was wiser to trust to the mercy of God for his soul, than the humanity of the slave-trader for his body. Bodily fear, not conscientious scruples, prevailed.[36]

In this passage, Listwell not only expresses the semantic possibility of deviation contained within his name—the deviation, in his own words, from "conscientious scruples"—but also reveals himself to be, in fact, a worthy object of reform, given the contradiction of his commitment to the anti-slavery movement and the concealment of that commitment due to an attachment to his own personal safety, judged to be an unscrupulous act. The narrative's most profound judgment on the disequilibrium of Listwell's anti-slavery commitments and attachments, however, comes when he discovers that Washington, having returned to the United States for his wife, has been re-enslaved and is about to be put on the slave ship *Creole* to be sold in New Orleans. Listwell says to Washington, "Oh! It was madness to

35. Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 223.
36. Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 237.

have returned," to which Washington replies, "Sir, I could not be free with the galling thought that my poor wife was still a slave. With her in slavery, my body, not my spirit, was free."[37] In addition to the return of the term "galling" from Washington's opening indictment of his consciousness of "cowardice and indecision" regarding his commitment to his own freedom, Douglass has Washington express a sentiment concerning the latter's wife similar to one he himself expressed just six years prior regarding the sense of linked fate and sympathetic identification with his family and America's enslaved Africans. At the time, one may recall, those were his only attachments, the only things he claimed that linked him to the United States, as he vehemently declared himself not to be a patriot, but six years later he would write a story where such attachments would be held up as part of an heroic ideal and condition for all of the country's freedom-loving inhabitants to emulate and meet if the principles of 1776 were to endure.

Conclusion

In dialogue with Bernard Yack's concept of "the longing for total revolution,"[38] anthropologist David Scott argues in his monograph *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, that one of the fundamental features of modernity is the "construct[ion] [of] a normative expectation of resistance or overcoming."[39] One of the primary signs of conscription into viewing the world and of historical possibility in terms of these expectations, according to Scott, is the type of redemptive stories one tends to tell. A type of storytelling called "revolutionary Romanticism,"[40] he says, became the literary mode *par excellence* for narrating stories of resistance and overcoming. Identifying "Romance" as one of the four modes of emplotment in Western literary history, historian Hayden White, to whom Scott refers, states in his *Metahistory* that Romance "is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it and his final liberation from it. . . . It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall."[41] Scott also points to White's description of "Tragedy," another of the aforementioned modes of emplotment in Western literary history, because he believes that the unique mode

37. Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 239.

38. Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

39. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 114.

40. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 59.

41. White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 8–9.

of emplotment that tragedy offers may provide a more useful way of confronting the altered sense of possibility that follows (or at least should follow, he argues) the failure of revolutionary hopes and projects.

I, however, believe that both of these forms of emplotment can be put to slightly different use in describing the existential stakes of seeing and envisioning change entailed in the reform-revolution dialectic, but first, White's description of tragedy:

> The reconciliations that occur at the end of Tragedy are much more somber, they are more in the nature of resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. These conditions, in turn, are asserted to be inalterable and eternal, and the implication is that man cannot change them but must work within them. They set limits on what may be aspired to and what may be legitimately aimed at in the quest for security and sanity in the world.[42]

I believe that the reform-revolution dialectic, as illustrated by Wordsworth's and Douglass's respective shifts in position from revolution to reform, provides the possibility for a slightly different interpretation of romance and tragedy as complementary modes of emplotment. As I have endeavored to show in this essay, a kind of reformational romance played a crucial role across the long nineteenth century in the aestheticization of an ethic of attachment that arguably continues to shape how modern political subjects in the Anglo-American world view their national sympathies, and that from this perspective the heroic thing—the good that triumphs over evil—is that which preserves rather than destroys. Thus, transcendence is achieved through the surrender to continuity. As for tragedy's new relationship to this altered reading of romance as a mode of emplotment, I propose an expansion of its purview: whereas for Scott its assertion of limits that man cannot alter only applied previously to the registering of revolutionary disappointments, I believe that tragedy should now also capture the disappointments of those who feel ill-served by the problem-solving constraints of reformational romance, and by the latter's seemingly boundless demands for greater and greater profusions of affection and attachment. It has been my underlying contention throughout this essay that the dialectical Anglo-American traditions of reform and revolution must be reconsidered in terms of their dilemmas in order to be understood, and that with a better understanding of the choices perceived and then made over time, one can choose, in the variety of presents, to rest confidently within those dilemmas or to resist their bounds.

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42. White, *Metahistory*, 9.

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