

**Douglass, Hegel and the
Dialectic of the Slave and the
Master**

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Abstract

*The present article deals with the influence that Frederick Hegel's **Phemenology of the Spirit** might have exerted on Frederick Douglass's ideas as developed in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. It attemptst to answer the following questions: Why link Hegel the German master of idealist philosophy to Douglass the Black American ex-slave? How did Douglas come into contact with Hegelianism? And what version of the Hegelian dialectic of the slave and master did he put forward to defend the cause of the American slaves during what is known as the abolitionist phase of American history of the nineteenth century?*

Résumé

*Nous nous proposons dans cet article de traiter de l'influence que l'œuvre hégélienne *phenomenology of the spirit* pourrait avoir exercée sur l'argumentaire de Douglas tel que développé dans *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*. Nous tâcherons d'y répondre aux questions suivantes: pourquoi cette passerelle entre, d'une part, Hegel, le maître allemand de la philosophie idéaliste, et, d'une part, cet esclave noir américain affranchi? Comment Douglas est-il venu au «hégélianisme»? Sous quel angle a-t-il appréhendé la dialectique «hégélienne» maître-esclave pour la mettre au service de la cause des esclaves américains, lors de l'épisode abolitionniste dans l'histoire américaine du 19^{ème} siècle?*

Introduction

The discussion opens with a brief biography of Frederick Douglass, laying special emphasis on the circumstances that presided over the literary encounter of Frederick Douglass the Black American “slave” and his namesake Frederick Hegel, the German master of philosophy. Douglas started his biography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845) with these moving sentences about the dehumanising process of the American slave system: “I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (15). Douglass continues his autobiography by pointing out that he was a “cross-breed” of a black American woman Harriet Baily and her white master Antony.

To increase the pathos of his narrative further, Douglass informs the reader of another horror of chattel slavery. “My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant – before I knew her as my mother” (15). In other words, mother and child were auctioned like chattel and sent down further South to a new slave master.

The first edition of the *Narrative* was prefaced by W.M. Lloyd Garrison, the leader of the American Abolitionist movement and chief editor of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. Garrison ended his preface with the following exhortatory words: “Reader ! Are you with the man-stealers in sympathy , or on the side of their down-trodden victims? If with the former, then are you the foe of God and man. If with the latter , what are you prepared to do and dare in their behalf ?” (9) *The Narrative* also included a letter from Wendell Phillips Esq. To all evidence, Phillips knew quite well what Douglass was at when he wrote his autobiography. This is how he started his letter:

You remember the old fable of “The Man and the Lion”, where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented “when the lions wrote history”. I am glad the time has come when the “lions write history”. We have been left long enough to gather the character of the slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters” (11).

Two remarks should be made here. One, Phillips underlines another dimension in the *Narrative* since as Garrison did in the Preface, he regarded that Douglass' autobiography as propaganda for the abolition of slavery. Two, Phillips foregrounds the corrective perspective from which Douglass wrote about history. In interpreting it in such way, Phillips elevates the *Narrative* well above the circumstances in which it was written. In other words, Phillips gives to it the status of a philosophical document on a par with Hegel's *Philosophy of History*.

The appreciation that Phillips had of Douglass' autobiography was such that he compared it to the *American Declaration of Independence*. In this regard, he warned Douglass against the danger of recapture and re-enslavement by his former masters, comparing Douglass' situation to that of the Founding Fathers:

They say the fathers, in 1776, signed the *Declaration of Independence* with the halter about their necks. You, too publish *your declaration of freedom* with danger compassing you round. In all the broad lands which the Constitution of the United States overshadows, there is no single spot, - however narrow or desolate—where a fugitive slave can plant himself and say, "I am safe." The whole armory of Northern Law has no shield for you. I am free to say that, in your place, I should throw the MS. into the fire (12-13).

Douglass did not burn his manuscript because before the year 1845 had passed, four editions of the *Narrative* were published in the United States, and other issues followed in 1846, 1847, 1848 and 1849.

However, in order to escape re-enslavement, Douglass, with the help of abolitionist friends like Garrison, found sanctuary for nearly two years in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. His book had met with the same success in England as in the United States. Two editions were published in Ireland by Webb and Chapman in 1845 and 1846, followed by another edition by Wortley, Leeds in 1846. As a whole, it had gone through nine editions in England by January 1848. The second edition included a refutation of a former slave holder A.C. C Thompson and a rejoinder from Douglass himself, which read as a Hegelian confrontation of a former master with a former slave. Douglass' autobiography also knew several editions in translation, first into Dutch in 1846, then into French in 1848.

The *Narrative* was published in an expanded edition in 1855 under the title *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The title of this edition echoes clearly Hegel's section of *Phenomenology of the Spirit* entitled "Of Lordship and Bondage." *My Bondage and My Freedom* was published in New York by Miller, Orton and Mulligan with an introduction from an Afro-American graduate of Glasgow University, Dr. James McCune Smith. Of this edition to which were appended essays like "Letter to his Old Master," "The Slave Party" and "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," Smith wrote: "the style of Mr Douglass in writing is to me an intellectual puzzle. The strength, affluence and terseness may easily be accounted for, because the style of a man is the man; but how are we to account for that rare polish in his style of writing, which, most critically examined, seems the result of careful early culture among the best classics of our language." *My Bondage and My Freedom* just like the *Narrative* won success and were re-issued several times both in English and in translation. It was this edition that Ottila Assing translated into German and published under the title *Sclaverei und Freiheit, Autobiographie von Frederick Douglass* in Hamburg by Hoffman and Campe in 1860, that is to say right at the start of the American Civil War (1860-1865).

Ottila Assing was not only the first translator of Frederick Douglass's work into German. Though she came from a cultured and intellectual family, she was deeply enamoured with Douglas. She provided assistance to Douglas at one of the crucial periods in his own life. On August 19, 1859, Douglass met John Brown in a quarry near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Brown let him know about his plan to seize federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in order to arm slaves in the surrounding area. Douglas refused to join the plot and tried to dissuade Brown because he knew that the plot would be a complete failure. Douglass left Chambersburg on August 21 without having managed to persuade Brown to drop out the plot. On October 16-18, Brown and his followers occupied the Harpers Ferry arsenal before being captured by federal troops. Among Brown's paper was found a letter from Frederick Douglass that made of him an accomplice to John Brown.

However, before a telegram from the Virginia authorities ordering his arrest in Philadelphia where he was lecturing reached destination, an anti-slavery telegraph operator warned Douglas who fled to New York before moving into Hoboken, New Jersey, to the

home of Ottila Assing. Assing smuggled Douglass out of the United States first into Canada and from there sailed to England on November 1859 because he was afraid that he would be extradited. While touring in Great Britain lecturing, Douglas learnt that Brown was hanged in Virginia on December 2, 1859. It is clear from the above episode in Douglass's life that Assing was an intimate friend to Douglas. Indeed, it was so intimate that Assing was said to have read Goethe, Feuerbach and Hegel to Douglass. On January 24, 1884, Douglass married Helen Pitts a white woman from New York. On hearing about Douglas' second marriage, Assing took her own life in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris.

That Douglas knew about Hegel's ideas about Africa and by extension about Africans and Afro-Americans was more than certain. In 1886, Douglass resigned from office of recorder at Cleveland's request, and on September 15 of the same year sailed in the company of his new wife Helen Pitts for England from where he began an extensive tour of Europe which took him southward into Egypt. Douglass tells the reader in his autobiography that his

...desire to visit Egypt rests on ...an ethnological purpose in the pursuit of which I hoped to turn my visit to some account in combating American prejudice against the darker coloured races of mankind, and at the same time to raise coloured people somewhat in their own estimation and thus stimulate them to higher endeavours. I had a theory for which I wanted the support of facts in the range of my own knowledge (1006).

Douglass gave indications about his ethnological theory and its real purpose earlier in the same text when he wrote that "the more he has seen of modern civilisation in England, France, Italy, the more he will want to see the traces of that civilization which existed when these countries were inhabited by barbarians" (1006). Any reader cognisant with Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* can hear the echo that Douglass' quote sends back to Hegel's text. In this text, Hegel turned back on what was supposed to be the 'dark night of Africa'. For Hegel "the sun rises in the Orient ...in all its majesty... and world history travels from east to west. ... Europe is the absolute of history, just as Asia is the beginning" (qtd. in Caroline 100). Hegel was one of the European philosophers who believed that slavery was basically

unjust and indefensible within civilised societies such as the United States. However, he did not depart from the French contemporary Count de Gobineau in the case he made in support of a European enslavement of Africans on the grounds that it was the sole means available for bringing them into world history.

That Douglass was writing against Hegel's Eurocentric view of world history shows in the following observations, that he had made during his travelling from Paris to Rome. "As the traveller moves between those two great cities, he will observe an increase of black hair, black eyes, full lips, and dark complexions. He will observe a Southern and Eastern style of Dress, gay colours, startling jewelry, and an outdoor free-and-easy movement of the people" (990). For Douglass the gradual darkening of skin pigmentation that he noticed as he was travelling southward from Paris into Egypt gives ample evidence that Egypt is the centre of an African civilisation. Douglass turns Hegel's Euro-centric vision of world that sets Africa on the margin upon its head by giving evidence of an Afro-centric vision of world history wherein Black Africa stands as the prime mover of the spirit of civilisation.

Douglass' Version of the Dialectic of the Slave and Master

The view to be developed here is that Douglass' revised and updated versions of his autobiography especially his *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* is closely connected to the question of self-definition and identity. There is no surprise in indicating this intention because the text under study here is an autobiography. Our contribution is to attempt to elucidate the question of "Who am I?" that Douglass had never ceased to ask himself in terms of its Hegelian articulation. Hegel tried to answer this question of "Who am I?" in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* a philosophical work which continued the idealist Greek tradition of self-questioning and self-investigation which was revived in the Enlightenment Period in the hands of Descartes, Rousseau, Kant and Fichte among many other philosophers.

Before expanding further on the Hegelian dialectic of the slave and master, we shall attempt to show how Douglass revises it in his *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* with particular reference to Chapter XV. Among all the chapters common to Frederick Douglass' autobiography, this chapter did not know the same revisions as the

other chapters, hence what we consider its centrality in Douglass' thought about the slave and master dialectic. The narrative of this chapter starts with Douglass' is handed by his master Thomas Auld to a "negro breaker" Edward Covey. The master's decision is due to Douglass' breaking up the Sabbath school he has organised for his fellow slaves. Auld has desired his slave to be "broken" lest he turns into a rebel like "Nat Turner". That's why Douglass heads to the Covey plantation on the morning of January 1, 1834.

Covey has a farm of "three or four hundred" acres and all the work force that he has at his disposal are three Negroes: Bill Smith, Bill Hughes and Frederick Douglass. He is comparatively a poor farmer. Just three days after Douglass' arrival at his farm, he starts "taming" him because the latter is leased out for a year and "the sooner he began the better". Douglass recounts how on one of the coldest mornings of the month of January, 1834, Covey has played on him a trick by ordering him at daybreak to get a load of wood from a forest about two miles away from the house on a cart drawn by a pair of "half-broken (untamed) horned oxen." With reference to this episode in his life, Douglass writes that "I saw in my own situation several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property; so was I. Covey was to break me – I was to break them. Break and be broken was the order" (567).

The self-irony in the quote above comes out just a few lines later in the narrative. Douglass has realised that the oxen are half-tamed; he has for a moment thought that he has broken them on his way out to the forest. However, on his return to Covey's home in hurry to be on time, he "let go the end of the rope on the horns of the 'in-hand oxen' to open the gate to Covey's plantation house, off go the oxen crashing the cart against the gate".

Douglass has gone to Covey to explain how the oxen are half-tamed and that it is not his fault that his gate is damaged. Tricky as he is, Covey has gone to check if what his slave is saying about the oxen is true. Of course as can be expected from oxen which have had their spree they have become the gentlest creatures that can be imagined. It is in this way that Covey has had the first opportunity to try out his skill of "Negro breaker" on Douglass. This is how Douglass reports the first flogging at the hands of Covey: "he rushed at me with something of the savage fierceness of a wolf, tore off the few and thinly worn clothes I had on, and proceeded to wear out on my back

the heavy goads which he had cut from the gum tree. This flogging was the first of a series of floggings..." (569)

Douglass recounts the harrowing details of his chastisement, but it is not necessary to go into them here. It is enough to deliver the reader the following reflection which summarises the effect that Covey's brutality has had on Douglass:

A few months of his discipline tamed me. Mr Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed; the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and *behold a man transformed into a brute*" (emphasis mine).

Douglass is reduced to a mere object in the hands of Covey, but even so Covey has not ceased looking for opportunities to beat him. It is after one such severe beating that Douglass flees to his master Thomas Auld to display the cruel treatment that he has received at the hands of Covey just because he has stopped work to take a rest after a severe headache. Douglass knows that it is pointless to appeal to his master's human emotions, so he has thought of reminding that Mr Covey is endangering a valuable property of his, namely Douglass himself. However, Auld Thomas has found excuses for Covey's brutality and orders him to return to Covey immediately.

It has to be observed here that Douglass plays a variation on Hegel's dialectic of the slave and the master in at least two ways. In Hegel's story of the master and slave, the master is portrayed as being careful not to reduce the slave into a thing or an object because if the slave falls below the threshold of respectability, as in the case of Douglass, the recognition that s/he will get from the slave will be diminished. In other words, it is as unsatisfactory as the one s/he will get from the consumption of objects. True recognition requires both of the parties to be of equal standing that is persons. This imperative set by Hegel for the achievement of self-ownership and therefore master's freedom from the surrounding objective world is described as missing in the relationship that the white American master holds with his black slaves. The slave as Douglass describes himself is reduced to less than a slave, a mere "brute." It follows that the slave master Covey is not up to the standards that Hegel has set for his master,

Covey, who remains in a similar bondage to the objective world of his slave Douglass.

The other variation that Douglass plays on Hegel's dialectic of the slave and master resides in the status accorded to work. In Hegel's dialectic, the slave enhances the master's sense of freedom from the outside world otherwise than the real status of the slave. The slave does the work for the master, so he no longer needs to be active in pursuit of the objects of his desires. The master still has desires and still seeks to satisfy of these desires, but he no longer needs to engage with the physical world to satisfy them, once he has imposed his domination over the slave. It is left to the slave to cater to this needs, and for him to concentrate on the enjoyments of the goods that the former produces. This notion of the slave's work as an enhancing factor in the sense that the master has of himself is absent in the episode of *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* under study here. Douglass has become a very obedient and conscientious field hand just after six months' stay with Covey. Yet this does not save him from Covey's cruelty. Covey, the slave master, has nearly lost one of the two workers who work in his "three or hundred acres farm" just in order to assuage his sense of cruelty. For him recognition as master is simply not enough.

The comparison between Hegel's master with Douglass' master Auld Thomas is equally worthwhile. It has already been noted that Douglass draws his master's attention that Covey is in the process of damaging his property, which is himself. Auld has remained deaf and blind to this economic reasoning. Auld's neglect of his private property, which is a human being, can be seen as an indication that the relation between masters and slaves in American slavery system is far below that philosophical ideal that Hegel describes in his dialectic. One of Hegel's arguments in his *Philosophy of Rights* is that freedom or self-consciousness is closely connected with private property. More about this connection between freedom and private property will be said later when I will deal about Douglass sets to get his freedom. Hence, it is worth quoting Hegel about how private property promotes freedom:

To have even an external power over something constitutes possession, just as the particular circumstance that I make something my own out of natural need, drive, and arbitrary will is the particular interest of possession. But the

circumstance *that I, as a free will, am an object to myself in what I possess and only become an actual will by this means* constitutes the genuine and rightful element in possession, the determination of property (Emphasis mine).

Thomas Auld in his *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* renounces to his property. From here it follows that the Hegelian slave dialectic in Douglass' autobiography is completely askew. It has to be observed here that it is the private property which enhances freedom since it allows persons to achieve mutual recognition of each other's status as *discrete moral beings*. Recognition is achieved when respect is granted to the authority of the persons concerning the property at their disposal. No need to state here that the slave in Douglass' autobiography represents one such property.

Before continuing the discussion of the variation that Douglass plays on the Hegelian dialectic of the slave and master it is worth taking over the summary of Douglass' narrative at the point it was left. That is, at the point wherein Douglass flees to his master Thomas Auld because of cruel treatment and the order that the latter gives to his slave Douglass to go back to Edward Covey the "Negro Breaker." Thomas Auld is afraid that "he could not take me from him (Covey); that should he do so, he would lose the whole year's wages". Desperate as he is, Douglass does not go back to Covey's custody immediately. He spends some time in the woods praying God for deliverance from slavery in general and from the cruel Covey in particular.

It is while Douglass is in the woods praying that another slave, by the name of Sandy Jenkins, is going through that portion of the woods at night fall to spend the Sabbath with his wife living in a neighbouring plantation, "about four miles from Mr Covey's". Sandy is famous among local slaves for his good nature and his good sense. If Douglass comes out of his hiding when Sandy comes in sight, it is because Sandy "was not only a religious man, but he professed to believe in a system for which I have not name. He was a genuine African, and had inherited some of the so-called magical powers, said to be possessed by African and Eastern nations" (585). Douglass' faith in Sandy comes at a moment when he seems to have lost faith in the Christian God, the white man's God because of His failure to "let him and his people go."

Sandy is true to his reputation among his slave since he takes Douglass home to his black free wife's house. As Douglass is pouring his grief to Sandy, the latter offers to him by providing him with a "certain (magic) root, which, worn "always on the right side would render it impossible for Mr Covey or any other white man" to whip the slave. Hence, armed with this root, Douglass goes back to Covey's farm sure that he is now immune against surprise attacks from the "Negro Breaker." Douglass returns to Covey's household on a Sunday as Covey and his wife are going to Church. Covey is in his Sunday best and wearing angelic countenance. For some time, Douglass has thought that Sandy's magic root that he is carrying in his right hand has rendered him invulnerable to Covey's attacks. He even blames himself for having doubted about "the virtue in the root" out of "pride".

Little does Douglass suspect that if Covey has not beaten him on a Sunday, it is because of that hypocrisy that makes false Christians like Covey observe a pause in his cruelty during religious occasions. Hence, all goes well until Monday when Covey is freed from religious observance of the Sabbath. Covey returns to his customary brutality towards Douglass, and the latter having realised that there is no magic way out of his dire state, resolves make a stand against the Covey's cruel treatment. It is at this crucial episode of the narrative that Douglass gives us his version of Hegelian dialectic of the slave and the master.

This is how Douglass recounts how he has started his fight with Covey. He recalls that he has held his tormentor by the throat, knowing well that beating any white man in the South means a death sentence. Douglass, the slave, emerges on centre stage. Unlike the slave in Hegel who gives up the struggle with the master because of his fear of death, Douglass "held (Covey) so firmly by the throat that his blood flowed through my nails." To Covey's/master's question "Are you going to resist you scoundrel", he replies politely "Yes Sir." (588) What is important to note about Douglass' Hegelian dialectic is that no one gives up the fight. As the master/Covey sees that Douglass/the slave is determined to carry out the fight and that he is equal in terms of strength, he tries to enlist the help of other people from his household, both slave and free.

What ensues after Douglass' insubordination is worthy of note. Apart from Covey's cousin Hughes who has tried to help subdue

Douglass, and whom the latter has beaten off, the other people at hand have not interfered in the struggle. They have remained witnesses to the fight, interpellated by master and slave in turn. Bill, the hired man, affects ignorance of what Covey wishes him to do, and Caroline, the female slave at Covey's home, bravely refuses her master's instructions to hold Douglass. It follows from here that in Douglass' version of the Hegelian Dialectic the slave comes out as the equal of the master. Douglass trims it off of what is supposed to be the metaphysical fear of death that makes a slave a slave, and tones off the bravery that makes of the master a master. The cowardice that Hegel has made the major trait of the slave in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* sheds off on the master himself.

After a two-hour struggle, Covey gives up the contest and let Douglass go. Douglass tells us that since that fight with the master he has metamorphosed from an object "nothing" into a "man":

I was *nothing* before; I was a *man* now. It (the fight) recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with renewed determination to be a *free man*. A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity.... I was no longer a *servile coward*, *trembling* under the frown of a brother worm of the dust, but my *long-cowed spirit* was roused to an attitude of *manly independence*. I had reached a point at which I was not *afraid to die* (591).

What makes Douglass's version of the dialectic of the slave and master different from that of Hegel is that the principle of reciprocity in recognition is not twisted. Douglass's life-and-death struggle with the master has not made Douglass refuse to continue his work at Covey's farm.

It is worth noting that the master in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* dragoons his slave the dependent consciousness to work as soon as he establishes his domination over him. The slave accepts to do the necessary work to save his life.

In this context, Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the role which labour performs for the servant in the Hegelian dialect does apply to the historical experience of the blacks. "I hope I have shown", writes Fanon that here (that's the case of slaves in the United States) the master differs basically from the master described by

Hegel.” My analysis of the representation of the master in Douglass’s autobiography seems to be in line with that of Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. But Fanon’s representation of the slave also seems to be quite different from that of Douglass:

For Hegel there is reciprocity, here, the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. In the same way, the slave here is in no way identifiable with the slave who loses himself in the Object himself and finds in his work the source of his liberation. The Negro wants to be like the master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object. (Fanon 210-222)

Here, Fanon’s view of the Black slave must be qualified because Douglass does not consider himself free the moment that Covey has let go of his throat. In other words, the “man” that the Negro slave has become has not tried to be like his master. He does not turn his back on work. That is, Douglass, the autobiography writer, considers that the Hegelian paradigm of the slave and master remains valid as regards the importance of work for the achievement of self-liberation. Where Douglass the slave differs from Hegel the master is the former’s denial that the slave has a metaphysical fear of death.

The Hegelian Journey in Douglass’s *Life and Times*

The importance of education as a path to freedom is also explored from the point of view of what Hegel calls the “journey to freedom.” In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes four stages which the “bonded” self, i.e., the slave must ideally encounter in the journey of self-discovery and freedom. In the first stage, s/he must experience *stoicism* and resist *he introspects his/her own urges*_being crushed by the dominance that is directed towards him. In the second stage, s/he must experience *skepticism* as he doubts the right of the dominating party to relegate him to inferiority ; In the third stage, the skepticism s/he has directed outwards at his/her master/mistress must be directed inward while s/. In himself/herself s/he finds all the urges of the master/mistress and the servant. Finally, in the fourth stage, the

hero/ine must strive for transcendence of negative urges “false consciousness,” towards Hegel’s “rational consciousness”.

All four stages of the Hegelian journey are present in *life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. The first stage starts the moment that he quits his grandmother’s hut to live in Colonel Llyod’s plantation where his old master Captain Aaron Anthony worked as a butler. It is in the second chapter entitled “Removal from Grandmother’s” that Douglass describes his first journey to consciousness. He writes that the twelve miles from Tuckahoe the whereabouts of his grandmother’s hut to Colonel Llyod’s plantation “was quite a severe test of the endurance for my young legs”. But the pangs of consciousness start when the grandmother leaves him in Colonel Lloyd’s plantation with his black brothers and sisters in slavery. Douglass ends this chapter by the following remark “this was my first introduction to the realities of the slave system” (481).

Until then, Douglass had lived with his maternal grandparents Bestsy and Isaac Bailey “whose kindness and love stood in place of my mother’s”. His life with his grandparents was a relatively cosy one because his grandmother enjoyed a “reputation of being born to good luck... a reputation ...full of advantage to her and her grandchildren, for a good crop, after her planting for the neighbour, brought her a share of the harvest” (476).

In the home plantation of Col. Llyod, he loses the “false consciousness” that his log-house belongs to his grandmother. He becomes aware that not only the log-house but also his grandparents and himself really belong to Cap. Aaron Anthony the head overseer in Col. Llyod’s plantation. Douglass’ stoicism shows itself in the “troubles of childhood” that he narrates about in the second chapter that he devotes to his life as a slave boy in Col. Llyods’ plantation. He recounts that a slave woman, by the name of Aunt Katy, in whose care he is put is very harsh and cruel with him. Aunt Katy, who contrary to all other slave mothers is allowed to keep her children with her, has the favours of the master. Consequently, she is prone to starve with the children in her care so that her own will eat to satisfaction. No matter how cruel Aunt Katy, Douglass resists being emotionally crushed by the dominance that she imposes on him. Aunt Katy has made him go without food for a whole day for an offence that he does not really manage to name. However, instead of weeping and imploring pity as any other child would have done in his place, he has

cared more about “his dignity,” and has gone “behind the kitchen wall and cried like a fine fellow.”

At the end of this excruciating experience, his mother appears on the scene. Aunty Kattie has caught him roasting an ear of Indian corn. Without the mother’s arrival, Aunt could have starved or beaten the life out of him because of his refusal to submit to her. “The mother took the corn from me and gave in its stead a large ginger-cake and she read Aunty Katy a lecture which was never forgotten.” It has to be remembered here that his mother was sold to another slave master some twelve miles away from Col. Lloyd’s plantation. She “had walked twelve miles to see me, and had the same distance to travel over again before the morning sunrise.” The mother’s presence boosts him up just at the moment that Aunt Katy is about to break his resistance. Douglass writes that “that night I learned as I had never learned before, that I was not only a child, but somebody’s child. I was grander upon my mother’s knee than a king upon his throne”(484).

Douglass’s stoic attitude to life has been kept all through his life as a slave. Needless to repeat here his refusal to be “broken” at the hands of the “Negro breaker” Covey. There are other experiences in his life that he recounts which are even more excruciating. One of them happens when he moves to Baltimore to Master Hugh’s house. Master Hugh has hired Douglass to Mr William Gardiner, an extensive ship builder on Fell’s Point. He reminisces how the white carpenters in the shipyard where he is working as a hired apprentice have kept him running him all day long in order to “make it impossible for me to stay” (629). Not only has Douglass managed to bear stoically all their insults, but he has refused to be crushed even physically. As many as four carpenters —“Ned North, Ned Hayes, Bill Stewart, and Tom Humphreys” have tried to bring him down to his knees without success. He tells the reader how after being on the ground with one of his eyes popping out of its socket, he “picked up the hand-spike as soon as (he) gathered strength and madly enough attempted to pursue them” (630).

Just as is the case with stoicism, Douglass starts to be sceptic about the right of his different masters to relegate him to inferiority even when he is a child. He dismisses one by one the ideas that slaveholders advance for the reduction of human beings into the state of chattel slavery. It is in Chapter VI entitled “A Child’s Reasoning”

that Douglass expresses his scepticism towards the natural condition of the slave. This chapter is preceded by another devoted to the "Slaveholder's Character," which needless to say, is made in unfavourable terms. He writes that the "incidents related in the foregoing chapter (V) led me thus early to enquire into the origin and nature of slavery." To the question "Why am I a slave" Douglass is given the answer that "God up in the sky "had made all black people to be slaves and white people to be masters." He is sceptical about this explanation because it stands against the notion of God's "goodness."

That black people were not born slaves shows in the stories Douglass has heard about some slaves who have fled to the North to be free. There are also the stories of those "slaves on Mr Lloyd's place who remembered being brought from Africa. There were others who told me their fathers and mothers were stolen from Africa" (498).

Douglass's scepticism about slavery increases gradually as he grows older. One of the turning points in this sceptical attitude is the "change of location." Douglass, as I have already indicated above, quits Col.Lloyd's plantation for Baltimore to live with "Mr Hugh Auld, a brother to Mr Thomas Auld, Miss Lucretia's husband" (521). It's in Hugh Auld's house that he learns to read and write. I have discussed in the previous pages the circumstances in which Douglass has managed to have access to reading in Sophia's home. It is enough to remind the reader here that the capacity to read has made it possible for Douglass to be acquainted with the anti-slavery literature of his time, and of course his scepticism towards slavery has become more militant. This is what Douglass writes about what reading Sheridan, Lord Chatham, William Pitt, all of them British opponents to slavery:

Here was indeed a noble acquisition. If I had ever wavered under the consideration that the Almighty, in some way, had ordained slavery and willed my enslavement for His own glory, I wavered no longer. I had now penetrated to the secret of all slavery and of all oppression, and had ascertained the foundation to be in pride, the power and avarice of man. With a book in my hand so redolent of the principles of liberty, and with a perception of my own human nature and of the facts of my past and present experience, I was equal to a contest with the religious advocates of slavery....(533).

Douglass comes back to the South twice: the first time at the death of his master Aron Antony to be reckoned in the “valuation” of property to be apportioned among the two remaining inheritors: Lucretia and Andrew. Douglass considers himself fortunate because it is Lucretia who inherits him. He goes back to live in Mr Hugh Auld’s household in Baltimore. It has to be observed here that Douglass is passed to Mr Hugh Auld to keep company to his son “Tommy.”

The second time that Douglass comes back to the South is made under a less auspicious sign. Both Lucretia, Douglass’ real mistress and Andrew Lucretia’s brother died in the same year. Hence? he becomes the slave of Thomas Auld, Lucretia’s husband. An unhappy incident between Thomas Auld and Hugh Auld leads the former to ask the latter back to his plantation in St Michaels, Maryland. Back from Baltimore in the North to Thomas Auld’s plantation further in the South, armed with “Growing knowledge” about the nature of slavery, and converted to the Episcopal Methodist church, Douglass becomes more than ever sceptical of the slavery system.

As soon as he arrives at his new home in St Michaels, he tries to organise a clandestine Sabbath school for Negroes. Caught red-handed in what is considered a subversive activity, Thomas Auld sends him to the Negro Breaker in order to learn slave manners. We have already detailed the experience that Douglass had in Covey’s farm. His resistance to Covey could not have happened if Douglass had not grown definitely sceptical of the right of a man be white to hold power over another man be it black.

Scepticism in Douglass just as scepticism in Hegel’s slave is not directed solely outward at his master but inward at himself as well. Several times in the autobiography he falls into introspection about his condition as a slave. At such moments, he comes close to forgetting about the several masters who hold them in bondage to concentrate on the system of slavery that makes of both slave and master victims and bonded men. It is in the transcendence of the negative urge to dominate that Douglass reaches what Hegel calls the “rational consciousness.” For example, even at the moment when he has overpowered Covey, he refuses to put on the hat of the oppressor because he manages to control his urge to dominance. Contrary to Fanon’s view of the slave in the colonial context, Douglass the slave does not want to be like his master.

Conclusion

The analysis of the *Times and Life of Frederick Douglass* allows *narrative* holds with Hegel's *master narrative* is neither that of imitation nor of stylisation. It is rather that of hidden polemics since Douglass distances himself from his master Hegel in several respects. Indeed, he distances himself to such a degree that we can say that their inter-textual relation is of the order of hidden polemics. Such hidden polemics is shown in what Bakhtin calls the "clashes over the referents" to which I have referred in the above discussion.

Among the referents over which Douglass' slave narrative "clashes" with Hegel's master, figures the willing submission of the slave to the master in order to save his skin. In Douglass' slave narrative, there is no such existential qualms that Douglass assigns to the slave because Douglass/the slave shows that he is ready to die rather than submit humiliatingly to the indignities of the master/Covey. The variation that Douglass /the slave plays on Hegel's dialectic has much to do with the debunking of the prevalent prejudice that black slaves remain at best comic figures incapable of having that tragic sense of life which makes of white men masters.

The second variation that Douglass plays over Hegel's dialectic relates to the value of work. In Hegel's "Of Lordship and Bondage," work alone saves the slave from extermination and wins him the recognition of the master. It is not the case in Douglass' slave narrative wherein work still remains the bond that links the slave and the master. But it does not make the latter less cruel to the former nor saves the latter from brutality and death. Douglass underlines the necessity for the slave to resist the master if he wants to have the mutual recognition necessary for the achievement of self-consciousness and freedom. This emphasis on the need for resistance and struggle for self-recognition is in line with Douglass' commitment with the militant faction of the abolitionist movement after his escape to the North in 1838.

So much for the distance that Douglass takes from Hegel in his representation of the master and the slave. However, Douglass does not make a clean sweep of Hegel's idea of freedom. He retains particularly the pertinence of the Hegelian journey to the black American slave by emphasising false-consciousness, stoicism, scepticism and introspection as necessary stages on the road map for

the achievement of that “rational consciousness,” a prerequisite for the realisation of a genuine freedom.

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