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Liberty as a Plural Mode: The Bounds of Romantic Subjectivity in *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* and ‘Ode to a Nightingale’

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*“Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a
brute!” (Douglass 62)*

Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass by Fredrick Douglass and ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ by John Keats depart meaningfully from the restrictive Millian view of liberty in their depiction of negative and positive liberty as entangled, simultaneous states. In his 1859 essay ‘On Liberty’, Mill argues that all should be able to exercise as an individual liberty free from interference unless in case of direct harm to another. Douglass and Keats complicate Mill’s view of liberty in their presentation of negative liberty (freedom ‘from’) as necessarily bound to the positive liberty of living as a humanised being. Fredrick Douglass’s *Narrative* negotiates between positive and negative liberty within the context of its abolitionist aim to liberate enslaved individuals from chattel slavery. *Narrative* frames this aim as entailing the freedom to a ‘state of being’ whereby the Black community can live in a human sphere free from racialised binaries. Conversely, Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ considers negative and positive liberty within the context of Romantic subjectivity. The poem interrogates a desire for freedom from the restraints of a human self which seeks to perpetually transcend to a divine ontological state. Paradoxically, acceptance of this desire enables existence in a human state, which, for Keats, is determined by the constant flux of the temporal sphere.

Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ negotiates the constraints of the Romantic ego fastened to a mortal, human self. The speaker desires to let go of the “weariness”, “fever” and “fret” of their human subjectivity and ascend to the plane of the nightingale’s song (Keats 23). However, the brilliance of the nightingale’s song cannot be maintained by the speaker’s fleeting subjectivity. The poem threads between the speaker’s self-aware, paling temporality and the enduring ecstasy of the nightingale’s music. The speaker is painfully aware that they are “born for death” unlike the “light-winged Dryad of the trees” (Keats 61, 7). The spirited assonance of “light-winged Dryad” diffuses across the dental consonance with an airy buoyancy that invokes the higher spiritual plane of the nightingale’s song (Keats 7). The long /o/ sound of the speaker’s lament, however, pulls toward a lower octaval register. Keats

weaves between these light and dark sonic registers, trying and failing to sustain the spiritual presence of the “Dryad[ic]” bird (7) that shifts in tandem. The speaker’s ascent to the “Queen-Moon ... // Cluster’d” by “starry Fays” quickly falls to “verdurous glooms” (Keats 36, 37, 40) and the music of “Faery lands forlorn” strikes “like a bell” that “toll[s]” the speaker’s “sole self” back to his dejected corporeality (Keats 70-72). Cosmic imagery enriched with a sibilant, empyreal sound register continuously mutates into the monotonous darker tone of the Romantic subject. The poem weaves in and out of the apostrophised Nightingale’s song unable to sustain the sound indefinitely or independently. As a result, the poem’s aural architecture intensifies the speaker’s inability to assert liberty from the temporally bound, emotionally perturbed density of the Romantic ego.

The Romantic freedom Keats negotiates in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is invoked by Douglass in his narrative representation of his journey to liberty. Douglass’s recollection that he “often, in the deep stillness ... stood all alone upon the lofty banks” directly interpolates the “steep and lofty cliffs” of Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ (Douglass 62), (Wordsworth 5-7). Wordsworth’s thoughts of “deep seclusion” are organised to construct, what Stelzig coins as, an “autobiographical construction of the self” in which a “dialectic of absence” and “presence” anticipates “future restoration” (Wordsworth 5-7), (Stelzig 142). Douglass fulfils this temporally layered dialectic and impels it with emotional charge as he traces, “with saddened heart”, the “countless ... sails moving off to the mighty ocean” (62). The absence of freedom and presence of pain culminate in an extended lamentation of enslavement: Douglass cries out “Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute!” (62). This highly charged rhetoric, formed from a succession of monosyllables, extends powerfully out from Douglass as the enslaved subject which vividly evokes the language and structure of the Romantic ego. He explains that his “soul’s complaint ... apostrophise[s]” the “moving multitude of ships” with the literary apparatus

used being explicitly noted. Actively describing the apostrophising of his soul, Douglass creates a distance within the triangulated address that shifts from the immediate intensity of previous invocations. Unlike Keats, therefore, Douglass invokes the Romantic ego as a literary effect which enables him to frame his autobiographical narrative through the lens of Romantic subjectivity. This, in turn, enables him to “mold” the narrative representation of “his own life ... to produce the greatest political and emotional effort” to further his abolitionist aim (Reid-Pharr 142). Douglass, therefore, whilst invoking Romantic subjecthood as a literary tool, exists outside of its constraints and asserts his fundamental aim of a liberated Black community through the text’s necessary connection to abolitionism.

By contrast, Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ exists solely within the bounds of Romantic subjectivity. As a result, the creation of a literary artefact is not liberating. The text, confined by Romantic anxieties and formal constraint, cannot occupy the temporal and spiritual transcendence of the Nightingale’s song. The poem’s form pulls at this inadequacy in its tension between sound and imagination. Whilst the speaker “listen[s]” to the “Darkling ... pouring forth [its] soul ... // [i]n such ecstasy”, to the reader, the song is an unheard melody and is inflected into imagined space (Keats 51, 58). Just as the speaker speculates that “the voice” of the “Darkling” was heard in “ancient days by emperor and clown”, this “voice” must fuse with memories of past heard songs and future anticipation to produce present imagination (Keats 51, 64, 69, 70). The nightingale’s music, transmitted from the ego of the speaker to reader, thus asserts itself as a disembodied mode. Even whilst unheard, the nightingale’s music is “essentially timeless” and corporeally transcendent (Gurney, 64). This contrasts the transitory mental and literary containers that cannot sustain the rapture of the music. Whilst Keats’s poetry emerges “from the darkness to delight readers in perpetuity” of “nightingale’s song”, this perpetuity can be maintained neither by the temporal constraints of the poem or the reader (Stafford 180). For Keats, therefore, production of a literary text

becomes a means to attain liberty as eternal ecstasy is momentarily fixed in literary and cognitive space.

For Douglass, however, the creation of a literary work is central to his wider aim of liberation through abolition through becoming a self-actualising individual grounded in community. In buying into a compelling literary personhood through use of the Romantic ego as a narrative device, Douglass “achieve[d] the public presence” required for his career in international diplomacy that sought to acquire worldwide support for the abolition of chattel slavery (Reid-Pharr 142). Despite the individual narrative framing, as recent developments in scholarship contend, he extends beyond positioning himself “as an exceptional self-made man” with closer analysis revealing the key role community played in his journey to liberation (Roy 2). Douglass formed a community so tight knit that its individual constituents “never moved separately” (75-76). Douglass describes this community as “one” collective united through “tempers and dispositions” and “mutual hardships” each member was “necessarily subjected to” (76). In the creation of an autobiographical narrative Douglass develops his learning of literacy, deeply enmeshed in the community where he kept a “Sabbath school”, to an act of self-authorisation that exerts positive freedom as a creational being (75). Douglass’s “textual corpus” is thus “virtually inseparable from its context” as inextricably bound in community (Roy 1). Whilst the narrative accounts for his individual journey, the “fixed determination” to self-liberation fundamentally belongs to “we”: Douglass’s collective community (77). In authoring his journey to liberation, Douglass asserts himself as a self-actualising individual able to render his experience in literary form. This individual liberty, authorship, and creation of narrative is nonetheless grounded in the community that shaped his journey. For Douglass, literary creation therefore becomes a means of positive liberation that enables Douglass to set out on his abolitionist aim and

support his community, seen and unseen, by hastening “the glad day of deliverance to the millions of ... brethren in bonds” (106).

Keats likewise negotiates the process of positive liberation in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ in his creation of a dialectic between the constraints of human corporality and the sacral, eternal sphere. The intense rapture of the Nightingale’s song leads to the speaker to be “too happy in thine happiness” (Keats 6). This happiness, in turn, gives way to pain so acute that “it seems rich to die” (Keats 55). The poem’s paradoxes continue to detangle and rebind as the speaker is “embalmed in [a] darkness” (Keats 43). The assonance of the long /a/ connects the polarities in an uncomfortable fusion: the speaker is wrapped in a silken darkness – a metaphorical death – that paradoxically heightens the other senses. Only when the impossibility of extended spiritual actualisation is accepted in the final stanza, does the speaker begin to exist in the necessary ambivalence of human temporality. The potentiality of the speaker’s unanswered questions “[w]as it a vision, or a waking dream” and “do I wake or sleep” stabilise the previous contradictory currents by existing within them without surging towards spiritual transcendence (Keats 79-80). Keats thereby escapes the chief fallacy of the first-generation Romantics by rejecting the “demand that all of life’s moments should be equally ecstatic” and Keats synthesises the “conflicting impulses” through saying “both “yes” and “no” to the facticity of human existence” (Gurney 67, 59). Acceptance of ambivalence and contradictory desire thus enables an existence ‘of being’ within the Romantic ego. However, the paradoxical liberty the speaker achieves is a simultaneous entrapping: what enables a positive ontological liberty as a human being is nonetheless trapped within cyclical motion of the Romantic self’s desire to transcend the pain of human temporality and mortality.

Whilst Keats is unable to ascend to the spiritual plane of the human-divine dialectic, Douglass brings the spiritual to the human sphere to deconstruct the racial binary

underpinning the institution of chattel slavery. In turn, he asserts a mode of ontological existence that transitions from negative to positive liberty. Within the text, Douglass redistributes the theological patronage of the “*slaveholding religion*”, affirming that “divine Providence” is in his favor” with the “living word ... of spirit” guiding his journey to liberation (101, 37). In *Narrative’s* appendix, Douglass moves beyond spiritual redistribution to explicitly renounce “the corrupt ... woman-whipping, cradle-plundering, ...hypocritical Christianity” of enslavers (101). Exposing the illusory theological foundations of chattel slavery, Douglass subverts the racial binary which has denied him “existence” in the “human” sphere (51). As a result, he exposes this binary as dependent on fraudulent spiritual vindication and inextricably linked to the institution of chattel slavery itself. In dismantling its theological roots, Douglass positions the enslaved and liberated Black community into a divinely supported human existence. In doing so, the “[B]lack community as a sanctified location for authentic Christianity” is affirmed and sacred experience is reclaimed (Carson 20). As a result, Douglass self-authorises an existence as a human being that disrupts the explicitly unsanctified racial binary underpinning chattel slavery. In Douglass’s final abolitionist act, he thereby combines his freedom from the restraints of slavery with a positive freedom: liberty to exist as a humanised being.

Complicating Mill’s idea of sole negative liberty, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and *Narrative* present liberty as a plural state which fundamentally aims at a ‘freedom of being’ in a human modality of negative and positive liberty. Integral to this aim is the negotiation of the sacral sphere: whilst Keats must supplant his desire for sustained spiritual illumination to exist within the contradictory impulses of the Romantic ego, Douglass must supplant and reclaim the institution of sacralty used by enslavers to affirm sanctified existence as a human being. For Keats, accepting the ambivalence of the Romantic ego enables him to exist in a fluid, temporal human state amidst his desire to transcend. Douglass likewise exists in a state

of positive and negative liberty whereby he is 'free from' the institution of chattel slavery and 'free to' exist as a humanised being. This state, moreover, exists outside the Romantic ego of Keats's freedom: for Douglass this was no more than a literary tool to self-authorise and support the abolitionist aim of his autobiographical narrative. Therefore, whilst Keats's 'freedom of being' exists within the limitations of spiritual transcendence, Douglass's exists outside of this: he reaches tangible liberation underpinned by spiritual affirmation that he connects to wider community.

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