Deceiving Polarities:  
The Example of Douglass and King  
by Wesley Ketchum

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called for recognition of the ugliness of segregation, he called for action against that new flavor of slavery. He demanded an end to that "shameful condition"; he demanded that all receive the "riches of freedom and security of justice"; and he made these demands because he believed in what he called the "fierce urgency of Now" ("Dream" 3, 5, 6). King thus followed in a long line of American voices that have called for revolutionary political action without delay and without compromise. Frederick Douglass was one such voice. A century before King denounced the immorality of segregation, Douglass denounced the dehumanizing effects of American slavery. When King spoke his dream of equality and peace, he echoed Douglass's social vision, later poetized by Robert Hayden, of "a world where none is lonely, none hunted, alien" (62). King stated that "injustice must be exposed, with all of the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of natural opinion" ("Letter" 369). Douglass more bluntly stated: "The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed" ("Fourth" 45). In his first autobiography and his abolitionist speeches, Douglass too addresses the "fierce urgency of Now" by bringing to light the appalling schism between slaves and white society. The polarity that defines this schism threatens to paralyze action—to prevent the present from freeing itself of the past and pushing forward into the future. Thus Douglass makes polarity a central theme in his writings. In the very act of exposing the gap between white and black, Douglass effectively bridges the gap between a villainous past and a future of unbounded opportunity with an aggressive "Now."

Douglass does not address the racist polarity in American culture as an abstract notion; rather, he easily recognizes, thoroughly describes, and clearly explains it through examples from his own life. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845) serves as a window into the life of a slave, and through that window Douglass candidly reveals to white society the evil nature of slavery. His "first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery" was his listening to the "rude and apparently incoherent songs" that slaves sang. To him they were "tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish." Yet Douglass was shocked to learn that white society used those same songs "as evidence of their contentment and happiness." The songs that "represent[ed] the sorrows of [the slave's] heart" were misconstrued to embody the exact opposite (Narrative 290). The polarity in the perception of these songs dramatized the gulf between slave and free. White society could not understand the true emotions of the slaves, and this failure of comprehension allowed those who profited from slavery to twist and turn, deform and deny those emotions.

Douglass was further convinced "of the infernal character of slavery" by the treatment of his grandmother in her old age (313). Placed in a shanty hovel and expected to support herself, she was tossed away to die alone despite many years of faithful service. Subjected to the "base ingratitude and fiendish barbarity" characteristic of slavery, she was sentenced to a comfortless, miserable death to cap off her comfortless, miserable life (313). Polarity appears here as well: Douglass understood that his grandmother "had been the source of all [her old master's] wealth," yet to her white owners she was just a slave "of but little value" due to her old age (313, 314). They saw slaves as property, worth only as much as they could produce, deserving of nothing more than bestial care. Just as white society could not accept the true emotions of the slave, it also could not accept the true value of a slave as a human being.

Douglass more explicitly exposed this polarity in his Fourth of July speech of 1852, where he contrasted what had been achieved in the past with what was still to be accomplished. His strong praise for America's founding fathers—their character, their ideals, and their actions—testifies to his high regard for them. "I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration," he acknowledges. "They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with [American society] to honor their memory" ("Fourth" 22). Yet despite sharing in appreciation of the founders' acts, Douglass does not join in the jubilant spirit of America's Fourth of July holiday. Instead he submits a lengthy list of negatives, aptly describing how slaves are forced to
view that anniversary, as evidence of a dangerous discrepancy that ultimately marks the day as a failure:

To [the slave], your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. (47)

Douglass's portrayal of the day's "scorching irony" is meant to define the underlying polarity in viewpoints between the enslaved and the free, just as America's "high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between them" (37, 45). His haunting observations leave no doubt of the existence of a dark schism in America.

That schism can also be examined and understood in terms of a disconnection between the way things have always been in America and the way they might become. Polarity severs the fabric of time, separating a long history of slavery from the hope of freedom in the distant future. In order to mend that tear, Douglass must oppose both sides of that divide. Arguably his most obvious opponents are those who actively fight progress: the slaveholders themselves. He recalls that "the watchwords of the bloody-minded... in those days, were, 'Damn the abolitionists!' and 'Damn the niggers!'" (Narrative 349). Douglass became convinced that every action taken by slaveholders was meant to perpetuate the notion of white superiority among the slaves. Frequent lashings, the drunken celebration of Christmas, and the prohibition of education among the slaves were all instituted "to darken [the slave's] moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason" (349). Just as they physically enslaved African-Americans, slaveholders meant to mentally enchain blacks—and all of America—to the ideology of slavery. They wanted to bind America to the past, and so they worked to mask any possibility of a better future and to question any possibility of a meaningful present. This motive stood in direct contrast to the "fierce urgency of


Now" that grew upon Douglass as he discovered his true condition as a slave.

But though he describes slaveholders, Douglass directs his argument not toward his former persecutors but toward passive abolitionists and those who knew little of the burdens of the slave. These people were, as King called them a century later, "white moderates" ("Letter" 368). Such people might tout a strong belief in freedom, yet they displayed hesitancy—or more accurately, reluctance—when it came to achieving freedom for all. They could see only two disconnected times: the past, with its ugly history, and the future, with its bright possibilities. So the white moderates advised "the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season,'" opting to hold out for a slow process of social change instead of acting in the present to realize that dream ("Letter" 369). A culture of racist polarity forced them to see any sign of disorder, discontent, or discord as extreme; it blinded them to the fact that only the "fierce urgency of Now" would forge the path to freedom.

Douglass understands that the greatest obstacle in the fight for freedom is this allegiance to a polarized perception, and in order to combat
it, he exposes the base contradictions it breeds. Polarity encourages hatred and misunderstanding; Douglass fights for justice and truth. He wishes to “pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke” against the “revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy” that surround him. Yet he does so with faith in the power of exposure (“Fourth” 45, 48). He hopes that by uncovering its most immoral crimes, America will recognize them, correct them, and forever desire to live up to the ideals that provide its foundation: “justice, liberty, and humanity” (“Fourth” 24). He believes that, in this way, the gap between slave and free, past and future, can be bridged.

It is this faith that motivates Douglass to continue his fight for equality. His words are not meant to oppose slaveholders quietly and kindly, or to appease moderates, but rather to impress upon his audience “the fierce urgency of Now” by revealing the harsh realities of slavery. He trusts that “the mere hearing of [the slave] songs would . . . impress some minds with the universal character of slavery” (Narrative 290). He trusts that the pitiful story of his grandmother will fill hearts “with unutterable loathing of slaveholders” (313). He believes that if America is awakened to the truth, if the nation is made to understand its injustice, if its people are made to realize how men are still slaves under the broken promise of freedom, then perspectives will be freed from the limitations caused by dualism, divisions will disappear, and all will be able to celebrate the nation’s independence. Douglass hopes to transform the future by drawing on the past to inspire the present, and he is sure that it can be done.

Thus his exposure of polarity sets the stage for ultimately destroying it. His most straightforward goal is to implant a deep desire in all Americans to aggressively pursue the dream of universal freedom “Now”—i.e., to overcome the gap between past and future with the present. Douglass reminds Americans, “Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and you must do your work” (“Fourth” 3, emphasis added). He calls that white society to action, challenging it to turn the course of the “young” nation away from slavery, once and for all (“Fourth” 4). “America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself false to the future” by continuing the practice of slavery, according to Douglass (39). Yet he does not “despair [in] this country”; he believes “there is hope . . . under the dark clouds which lower above the horizon” (74, 4). That hope depends on the “fierce urgency of Now,” as the bloody battles of the Civil War and the powerful protests of the Civil Rights Movement have shown.

Both King and Douglass demand that the truth “with all its ugliness” be unveiled “so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal” (“Letter” 369, 365). Both feel they must work to expose polarity, uncover injustice, denounce oppression and inequality, make seen “the hidden tension”(369), and then hold faith that the truth will set us free. Though a century apart, the two are almost one identical voice: both labor to abolish the ideological divide in American society by exposing, battling, and eliminating polarity; both make themselves heard so that understanding and comprehension may sweep over the nation; both share their dream “that one day [America] will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal’” (“Dream” 13). And both do it diligently and unceasingly because they believe in the “fierce urgency of Now.”

Works Cited


