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Irony, Silence, and Time: Frederick Douglass on the Fifth of July

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Frederick Douglass's oration, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" is a rhetorical masterwork of irony. It illustrates a strategy for enlisting the liberatory potential inherent in the detached and multiple perspective of irony without allowing that detachment to culminate in political impotence. The speech accomplishes this through opening before its audience the expansive visual and temporal spaces in which irony thrives, then collapsing those spaces so irony cannot be sustained. The speech therefore exemplifies a kairotic management of irony's scopic attitude, emphasizing for its audience the importance of seeing when irony is appropriate and when it is not. **Key words: irony, time, visual rhetoric, Fourth of July, Frederick Douglass**

IRONY, periodically, is declared dead. Some event occurs that makes it seem impossible to gaze on the world with an air of cool detachment, and irony suddenly seems to be an indecent luxury. Decisions must be reached, judgments must be made, actions must be taken, and the time for disinterested ironic play has passed. In such a world, the individualistic perspective of the ironist seems irresponsible. Irony is condemned, ironists are vilified, and irony's obituaries are composed.[1] Irony depends on, and helps to maintain, a protective barrier that insulates us from the necessity of commitment, and in a world where irony is dead, this protective barrier has been shattered so that we can no longer take passive refuge from a collective call to conscience. In times like these, it is not possible to dismiss appearances as mere façade, or the world as mere theater, or ourselves as mere spectators; we are forced into the fray.[2]

Reports of irony's demise always appear to be exaggerated, however. Individuals soon detach themselves from public commitments, barriers are reconstituted, and the world recedes again to a safe distance. Irony is an intellectual, not pathetic, attitude, and sometimes it may be useful not to feel too deeply.[3] An ironic distancing allows us to step back, see the big picture, and disengage from the present; it allows time for interpretation and promotes the broadened scope that allows us to see a situation from multiple angles.[4] Irony does not oblige us to act, and sometimes freedom from acting is as necessary as freedom to act. Banishing irony or declaring its death can be only a melancholy illusion because irony offers boons as well as dangers.

This oscillating response to irony stems from a disconnection between its figural and attitudinal manifestations. Irony is cast as an infectious and totalizing point of view, able to possess its practitioners and cause them to become ironists. Irony is understood as a way of being in the world, which is one source of its liberatory potential as well as its troubling tendency toward political disengagement. Irony's manifestation as a figural trope, on the other hand, is understood as politically inert. Because it is dissociated from attitude, there is no periodic need to purge the mere figure of irony from our midst. This lopsided disconnection between trope and attitude fosters a weak understanding of irony: stripped away from its figural counterpart, irony lacks rhetorical traction. It cannot be integrated into a rhetorical project because it is unable to support the necessary play "between the exercise of language for itself—the aesthetic impulse to 'look at language self-consciously'—and the pragmatic impulse 'to look through lan-

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language unselfconsciously' in order to intervene in the social world."[5] Irony, in other words, cannot be brought into sustained rhetorical engagement when it is acknowledged only as an unexamined and unselfconscious attitude, so it is alternately embraced and reviled.[6]

Theorists of irony frequently distinguish between irony as a totalizing character trait and irony as a figurative trope and make the former ascendant over the latter. Wayne Booth, for example, notes that "From the beginning, apparently, the word [irony] tended to get itself attached to a type of character … rather than to any one device." He goes on to argue that our culture may no longer recognize the figural form as irony.[7]

D. C. Muecke, similarly, distinguishes between the person who uses irony for rhetorical effect and the person "whose irony is an expression of his character," then notes that "historical changes now favor the second kind."[8] Richard Harvey Brown makes a similar distinction between practice and character, describing "ritual irony" as a temporary suspension of the usual rules of conduct and "dialectical irony" as a liberatory attitude of thought and action. He also notes that the dialectical form "is highly resonant with the contradictions of political life today."[9]

Recovering irony as a rhetorical resource requires a modification of this bifurcated and hierarchical configuration. The figural and attitudinal senses must be reconnected if we are to understand and assess the rhetorical potential of irony, as, for example, when a particular rhetor deploys the figural resources of irony in order to invite an audience to become ironists. This reconnection cannot be made through a more finely grained theory, because only rhetorical practice can draw the formal and functional dimensions of discourse together in a dynamic relationship.

In this essay, I focus on an unparalleled exemplar of rhetorical irony, Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" This text reveals the ways in which the figural resources of irony can be used to manage its potential for attitudinal possession so its boons and its dangers can be evoked for rhetorical effect. Our bifurcated understanding of irony is not repaired, therefore, but we are presented instead with a model for gaining control of irony's inherent oscillation. Specifically, Douglass demonstrates a temporal management of irony, locating some moments when irony is necessary and others when it is impossible.[10] He invokes the visuality of irony, inviting his white audience first to the broadened paratactic vistas that are underwritten by an ironic attitude, in which incompatible images can be held in close critical juxtaposition; then he shuts down these vistas by calling for judgment and action.[11] He first positions his audience at a remove from himself, from their own past, and from their world; then he collapses this distance. He first silences himself and his audience, requiring them to stand mute before the horrific inconsistencies of U.S. slavery; then he marks such silence as complicitous in the horror. In this speech, in other words, Douglass models a way to exploit the broadened inventional horizons that irony offers while enforcing limits that keep the ironic attitude from political impotence. In and through this speech, Douglass fashions a relationship between irony and its antidote.

The Fifth of July

Douglass's speech was delivered in Rochester, New York, at the invitation of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society.[12] His audience was predominantly white. Douglass was well known as a gifted orator, an international celebrity, a tireless

abolitionist speaker and organizer, and he was the most powerful black man in the nation. This speech, which may be, as Douglass biographer William S. McFeely puts it, "the greatest antislavery oration ever given,"[13] addresses two moments of fragmentation: the increasing sectional division in the 1850s over the future of slavery in the U.S., and Douglass's own recent public split with his long-time mentor William Lloyd Garrison. Three historic legislative events heightened the sectional crisis in the years just before Douglass's address. The "Wilmot Proviso," proposed in 1846 by Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, would have prohibited slavery in any new territory acquired in the war with Mexico. Although eventually killed in the Senate, the voting revealed in vivid relief the sectional tensions that characterized national politics; instead of the expected split between Democrats and Whigs, the vote was split between northerners and southerners. Four years later, the so-called "Compromise of 1850" threatened again to disrupt the delicate balance between North and South because its inherent ambiguity was decoded sectionally: the North saw it as inviting the spread of slavery, while the South saw it as curtailing the spread of slavery. Perhaps the most insidious political development was a direct corollary of that compromise: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which established federal support for returning runaway slaves to the South. Douglass vehemently denounced this act almost from the moment of its passage, declaring that it made the entire nation a slaveholding territory.

This growing national tension over slavery was paralleled by growing tensions within the abolitionist movement. Throughout the 1840s, Garrison was the leading U.S. abolitionist, and central among Garrisonian tenets was that the Constitution was a proslavery document. The only recourse was to dissolve the Union so it might be rebuilt on more agreeable terms; as Garrison once put it, "he is no true abolitionist, who does not go against this Union."[14] Other abolitionist efforts were either ignored or openly attacked by Garrison in the pages of his newspaper; it was his way or no way.[15] Garrison recruited Douglass in 1841, and in accordance with Garrisonian doctrine, Douglass soon filled his speeches with attacks on the Constitution and on the nation in general. Douglass began to eclipse Garrison as an oratorical star, however, and began to chafe under Garrison's inflexible formula. In January 1851, just 18 months before his fifth of July oration, Douglass publicly broke with Garrison and declared the Constitution an antislavery document.[16]

Douglass's first autobiography, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., notes, "has been deconstructed, reconstructed, historicized, New Historicized, psychoanalyzed and otherwise subjected to every implement of textual torture" that professional critics have been able to devise.[17] Although such has not been the case for Douglass's oratory generally, this critical omission has begun recently to be addressed. John Lucaites could say in 1997 that although there had been "a great deal of critical analysis of the rhetorical dimensions of [Douglass's] three autobiographies, as well as some consideration of his journalism, … on his oratory there is almost nothing." Today, however, a substantial body of critical literature concentrates on Douglass's oratory, and in particular on the fifth of July speech.[18]

Many of these critical essays note that Douglass's fifth of July speech is an exemplar of ironic oratory. Eric Sundquist, for example, calls the speech Douglass's "greatest instance of ironic oratory," and Lucaites argues that

> the rhetorical significance of this speech is a function of the ways in which Douglass employed an ironic framework to craft a usage of equality that would reconstitute the national public

> forum as a dialogue between past, present, and future, and thus enact a legitimate public space for the articulation of a uniquely African American political voice.[19]

Other authors attend to various constituents of irony in the text, such as the recurrent motif of doubleness. Bernard W. Bell traces Douglass's construction of a "double-consciousness" through the speech, Kevin McClure describes Douglass's recurrent use of antithesis and comparison, and Gregory Stephens suggests that Douglass, through this speech, constructs a "multiracial abolitionism."[20] These studies begin to rectify the embarrassing lack of critical attention accorded Douglass's oratory in general and the fifth of July speech in particular. None, however, focuses sustained attention on the most fundamental and unalienable characteristic of the speech, which is Douglass's bold understanding of the potentials and limitations of irony.

Gerald Fulkerson has demonstrated that the speech divisions familiar from classical rhetorical theory can be used to structure an analysis of Douglass's text. In the *exordium* Douglass establishes his humble character, disposing his audience to regard him favorably; in the narration he reviews the actions taken by the founding fathers to gain independence from Britain. Following a *partition* in which Douglass explicitly establishes his exclusion from the heritage he has just narrated, he offers his *confirmation*. This is the longest and most dynamic section of the speech, in which Douglass presents a critique of the "internal slave trade," of the Fugitive Slave Act, and of the complacency and complicity of the nation's churches. A brief *refutation* articulates his critique of the Garrisonian interpretation of the Constitution as a proslavery document, and the *peroration* offers hope for the future.[21] Although such a mapping of the speech is instructive and may reflect Douglass's compositional strategy, it may obscure the irony that is so central to this text. These divisions are significant not only because Douglass seems to respect them, but also because he does so in a way that simultaneously recognizes and subverts them. Most important, attending merely to these divisions obscures the temporal management of irony that this speech demonstrates. This temporizing of irony cuts across the progression of these dispositional phases, so I will refer to Fulkerson's map as a backdrop against which this temporizing occurs.[22]

Opening Irony

James Jasinski points out that in his opening lines, Douglass engages "in a complex process of generic subversion and reconstitution: he acknowledges the generic norm, calls its authenticity into question, but then affirms a reconstituted version of the norm."[23] Such bi-directionality, bringing before the eyes of the audience both the generic expectation and its subversion, is suggestive of the multiperspectival stance of the ironist. She or he must be both transparent and opaque, must seem to present the world in an unmediated or straight fashion while representing the world in a highly modulated or directed fashion. Ernst Behler describes the fundamental doubleness of irony as an "alternating flow of speech and counter-speech."[24] Douglass's exordium establishes this Janus-like persona as it unfolds over three distinct sections, marked in the manuscript by paragraphs.[25] The first two of these sections present a contradiction regarding Douglass's personal past experiences as an orator, and the third addresses this contradiction without resolving it, by situating the audience firmly in the present. The *exordium*, then, prepares the audience for the challenges of irony that are to follow by introducing an ironic perspective in which contradictory images might

inhabit the same field of vision. It also introduces a reference to space and time that becomes a central motif in the text.

Douglass begins by presenting a modest persona, declaring that he has never experienced a greater distrust of his speaking ability, proclaiming his limited powers of speech and, of most significance, saying that his "little experience … in addressing public meetings, in country school houses, avails me nothing on the present occasion."[26] Douglass acknowledges that such apologies are "generally considered flat and unmeaning," but trusts that his own "will not be so considered" (359). The protestation of modesty, the acknowledgment that such protestations are a generic expectation, and the insistence that this speaker's modesty is genuine are all generic expectations in Douglass's time, as in our own.[27] Their presence in Douglass's opening remarks does not in itself constitute irony, because these remarks do not lead the audience outside its norms. In his next paragraph, however, Douglass enacts another persona, equally authorized by generic expectations, but seemingly at odds with the first. Douglass contradicts his earlier claims of limited experience, confessing that, "it is true that I have often had the privilege to speak in this beautiful Hall, and to address many who now honor me with their presence." Yet even these more esteemed experiences, Douglass declares, offer little that might "free me from embarrassment" at the present (360).

These opening paragraphs situate Douglass's audience in the present, gazing into the past. Irony is synchronic, asking its auditors to see in two ways at the same time; it implies, as Linda Hutcheon describes it, "a kind of simultaneous perception of more than one meaning in order to create a third composite (ironic) one." Thus, "ironic meaning is simultaneously double (or multiple) … you don't actually have to reject a 'literal' meaning in order to get at what is usually called the 'ironic' or 'real' meaning of the utterance."[28] The ironist, therefore, must position the audience so that this doubled perspective might come into focus, and Douglass sets before his audience contradictory truths about his past: because of his experience as a slave, he is not qualified to speak; because of his experience as an orator, he is. This ironic dialectic plays throughout the text; slavery made him mute, yet has authorized him to speak. "The fact is," Douglass tells his audience, the "distance between this platform and the slave plantation … is considerable" and the "difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, are by no means slight" (360). The subjects of these clauses are the distance and the difficulties, and these can be judged only by bringing both platform and plantation into view. Both slave and speaker are fully present, set against the need "to deliver a fourth [of] July oration," and it is with this unresolved juxtaposition that we enter the realm of irony.

Among the paradoxes of irony is that the ironist must maintain a peculiar quiet. Too much interest spoils irony because it favors one or the other of its perspectives and, thus, freezes the necessary oscillation. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contrasts the ironic understater and the boastful boor, noting that ironists are likely to "appear to have more cultivated characters" because they "seem to be avoiding bombast, not looking for profit, in what they say."[29] If the ironist seems actively to be pointing out a temporal or hierarchical relationship between the two views, then the perspective is no longer ironic. Any judgment must seem to belong to the audience.[30] Throughout most of this speech, Douglass maintains this necessary quiet, presenting scenes and images before his audience without commenting on them. Here in his opening remarks, having set in motion the ironic oscillation between plantation and platform, he exits the scene. He has thrown his thoughts together, he says, with "little experience and with less learning,"

and merely will "lay them before you" as though he were a transparent medium. In reality, Douglass spent several weeks carefully crafting his text.[31] In this *exordium*, however, Douglass has caused himself to disappear while directing his audience's perspective, enacting the conspicuous silence of the ironist.[32]

Grounding Irony

As a Garrisonian abolitionist, Douglass was repeatedly told merely to tell his story and to leave the interpretation to (white) others.[33]

> In effect, the leadership of [Garrison's] Society used Douglass to create a rhetorical division of labor between descriptive and interpretive tasks … . Paradoxically, the Society offered Douglass a platform from which to speak but tried to contain his ability to claim public authority within clearly circumscribed boundaries.[34]

Douglass subverts this division of labor in the next section of the speech, offering description as interpretation and inserting his own voice by seeming to withdraw. Given a platform by the Garrisonians, but then muted, Douglass here mutes himself and, through this muting, articulates his point that under the present circumstances he cannot fittingly speak.

Within the text, according to Fulkerson's parsing, this would be the *narration*, but Douglass's is a peculiarly ironic narration on two counts: it is not his, and it is not exactly a narration. He repeatedly reminds his listeners that the story he is telling is not his own. July fourth, he says, "is the birthday of your National Independence" (360); he reminds them that "you were under the British Crown" (361); "your fathers" did not subscribe to the "infallibility of government" (361); they sought redress, were rebuked, and the rebuke made "the cause of your fathers grow stronger" (362); ultimately, "they succeeded; and today you reap the fruits of their success" (363). By the end of this passage, by Fulkerson's count, Douglass has used pronouns 33 times to divide himself from his audience.[35] As Neil Leroux puts it, "the charge is clear: The principles of liberty, recognized and practiced by Washington (and the fathers), have been neglected by contemporary America."[36] Kenneth Burke reminds us, however, that every division carries with it an incipient and compensatory identification.[37] "In order to be ironical," Richard Harvey Brown notes, "the ironist must impel her publics to make choices about their own categories of perception and evaluation."[38] As Douglass pushes himself away from his white listeners, he impels them toward their own past, requiring them to confront its inconsistencies.

The second ironic twist of Douglass's *narration* is that it is not merely a linear or chronological retelling of the birth of the nation; it also is a series of tableaux in which the emphasis is on the *mise-en-scène* rather than on the unfolding of the story. Again, irony relies on juxtapositions of potentially conflicting images that are made to occupy the same field of vision, so the ironist cannot concentrate exclusively on narrative; the temporizing of irony requires that relatively static juxtapositions be set against an unfolding of time.

Douglass describes the events leading up to the revolution in a generally chronological order, and he reinforces his forward momentum with two time-tested linear analogies, one to the trajectory of human life ("Seventy-six years, though a good old age for a man, is but a mere speck in the life of a nation … . According to this fact, you are, even now, only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of

childhood") and the other to the flowing of a river ("As with rivers so with nations") (360–361). Throughout his review, however, the emphasis is not on the order in which the events happened, but on the relationship between those events and the cultural context against which they occurred. Jasinski points out that in this section of the speech Douglass " 'denaturalizes' the revolution by removing its aura of inevitability, thereby restoring moments of choice and contingency; he radicalizes the revolution by recovering its audacity and its neglected principles."[39] Douglass does so through the paratactic logic of irony, showing that the actions of the founders were suited to their circumstances precisely because they were unsuitable. As Muecke explains: "To ironize something … is to place it, without comment, in whatever context will invalidate or correct it; to see something as ironic is to see it in such a context."[40] Radicalizing the revolution requires that his audience learn to read ironically, and Douglass schools his audience in a mode of ironic reading by presenting a series of three tableaux that illuminate a revolutionary and indecorous relationship between act and scene.[41]

In the first tableau, Douglass sets the founders against their own political milieu. Establishing the discourse of judgment and decorum that will govern the remainder of the *narration*, Douglass reminds his white audience that 76 years ago, "Your fathers esteemed the English Government as the home government," and that government imposed "upon its colonial children, such restraints, burdens and limitations, as, in its mature judgement, it deemed wise, right and proper" (361). The founders, however, "who had not adopted the fashionable idea of this day, of the infallibility of government … presumed to differ from the home government in respect to the wisdom and the justice of some of those burdens and restraints." Douglass notes that it has become "exceedingly easy" to say that America was right and Britain was wrong. "Everybody can say it"; indeed, it "is fashionable to do so" (361). The founders did not follow fashion, however, and it is for their indecorousness that they are to be praised: "To side with the right, against the wrong, with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor! Here lies the merit, and the one which, of all others," Douglass concludes, "seems unfashionable in our day."

The second tableau juxtaposes the actions of the founders against their observers who were constrained by the limits of complacency and decorum. At first, Douglass explains, the founders expressed their refusal to follow fashion "in a decorous, respectful, and loyal manner," through conduct that "was wholly unexceptional," but this strategy was ineffective, met only with "sovereign indifference, coldness and scorn." The founders "became restive under the treatment," and eventually "the idea of a total separation of the colonies from the crown was born!" (362). Douglass reminds his listeners that this "was a startling idea" and that the "timid and prudent … of that day were, of course, shocked and alarmed by it" (362). "Such people lived then," he continues, "had lived before, and will, probably, ever have a place on this planet; and their course, in respect to any change … may be calculated with as much precision as can be the course of the stars" (362–363). Douglass notes that the safety and comfort of decorous inaction retains its hold on some even in the present, but that sometimes it is not prudent to be prudent. If his white audience is to recover the dormant ideals of their forebears, they must do so as ironists.

The third and most complex of these tableaux juxtaposes the founders against themselves, showing them to embody the prudential imprudence of the ironist. Their ironic stance, simultaneously engaged and disengaged, is paralleled by Douglass's dizzying shifts in tone. For example, Douglass warns his audience that the Declaration

of Independence is "the very ring-bolt in the chain of your yet undeveloped destiny" (363): If "that bolt is drawn, that chain [is] broken, [then] all is lost. Cling to this day—cling to it, and to its principles, with the grasp of a storm-tossed mariner to a spar at midnight" (364).[42] At the center of this storm, yet separate from it, stand the founders. The clank of ring-bolts and the wash of the sea storm recede as Douglass remarks that the "whole scene, as I look back to it, was simple, dignified and sublime" (364). The founders exhibited a doubled character that allowed them to engage in political action without succumbing to the temptations of fashion: "They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage. They were quiet men; but they did not shrink from agitating against oppression. They showed forbearance; but they knew its limits. They believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny" (364–365). The founders' every move was "circumspect, exact and proportionate" (365), but this prudent sense of appropriateness is disrupted when Douglass notes that their "statesmanship looked beyond the passing moment, and stretched away in strength into the distant future" to seize on "eternal principles" (365). To disregard the expectations of the day and to act instead on abstract principles is the very definition of imprudence, yet such actions are almost universally applauded. This potentially destabilized duality is not a liability, but is instead the founders' most important legacy: they "were great in their day and generation" and "[t]heir solid manhood stands out the more as we contrast it with these degenerate times" (365).

The post-revolutionary generation, Russ Castronovo points out, "sensing its own belatedness to national glory … charged itself with a custodial duty of preservation."[43] Douglass is critiquing this conservative custodianship, asking his white listeners not to preserve the calcified memory of the founders but to adopt their indecorous attitude. Douglass does not accomplish this through invective, narrative, or logical argument. Instead, in three tableaux, he quietly juxtaposes the founders against their own milieu, against their observers, and against themselves. These scenes provide his audience with the necessary resources to discover that the most eloquent response to a situation is not necessarily the most fitting. Through his discourse, Douglass would prepare his audience for moral action by making them ill-fitted to their times.

Seeing Irony

These tableaux have established the visual emphasis of Douglass's rhetoric and prepared his audience for the parade of images that follow. The visual emphasis of the text becomes even more prominent as the speech continues through its *confirmation*. Douglass's vivid snapshot of Independence Day on a nineteenth-century courthouse square, for example, is worth quoting at length because of the contrast it creates to the horrors of the internal slave trade that he soon presents:

> Our eyes are met with demonstrations of joyous enthusiasm. Banners and pennants wave exultingly on the breeze. The din of business, too, is hushed … . The ear-piercing fife and the stirring drum unite their accents with the ascending peal of a thousand church bells. Prayers are made, hymns are sung, and sermons are preached in honor of this day; while the quick martial tramp of a great and multitudinous nation, echoed back by all the hills, valleys and mountains of a vast continent, bespeak the occasion one of thrilling and universal interest—a nation's jubilee. (365)

Before he introduces his audience to the contrasting horrors that are his main object, however, Douglass pauses to silence himself more completely. These images, it seems,

must be experienced by his white audience in as unmediated a manner as possible. If the "great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in the Declaration of Independence," were extended to him and to those for whom he is speaking, he declares, then he would find his present task "light," and his "burden easy and delightful." Indeed, if that were the case, even "the dumb might eloquently speak" (367). "But," Douglass reminds his listeners, "such is not the state of the case" (368). Douglass, the mighty orator, cannot speak. He asks his audience if they mean to mock him, to bid him speak on a day that renders him mute; he quotes Psalm 137—"let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth"—on the difficulty faced by the abject who would speak. Further, should Douglass today "chime in" with the "tumultuous joy" surrounding the celebration of the fourth of July, it "would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make a reproach before God and the world." At this point, after rendering himself mute, he announces that his subject is "American slavery."[44]

Douglass will stand "with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion" and "use the severest language I can command," while uttering nothing that any person "whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just." In other words, Douglass will speak, and yet not speak; his denunciation will consist of unmediated fact. Indeed, to those who say that abolitionists should "argue more, and denounce less," he replies, "where all is plain there is nothing to be argued" (369). He says he has "better employments for my time and strength" than to make such arguments (370); "at a time like this," he declares, defining the moment and naming the attitude toward which he has been directing his audience, "scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed" (371).

In his argument for the impossibility of argument Douglass repeatedly suggests propositions and then strikes himself dumb at their utter transparency. He need not argue that blacks are men, because the southern states' own black laws confirm it; he need not argue for equal manhood, because already blacks across the nation are engaged in all imaginable human pursuits; he need not argue that men are entitled to liberty because "you have already declared it" (370); he cannot bring himself to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes. Douglass the ironist has noisily silenced himself, bowing completely but conspicuously offstage.

The "display tour of the American slave market" that follows is, as Leroux points out, "a sensory experience of observation for Douglass's audience." Leroux has summarized the many references to the senses, primarily appeals to the eyes but also to the ears:

> Behold … you will see … I will show you … Mark the sad procession … Hear his savage yells … There, see the old man … Cast one glance … See, too … Suddenly! You hear … your ears are saluted … The crack you heard … Follow this drove … Attend the auction … Tell me, citizens, where, under the sun, you can witness a spectacle more fiendish and shocking. Yet this is but a glance at the American slave-trade, as it exists, at this moment, in the ruling part of the United States.[45]

The only glimpse of the narrator is in his distant youth, when Douglass notes with wry understatement that the "anguish of my boyish heart was intense" (374). Douglass has directed our gaze like a masterly documentary filmmaker, all the while, as he promised, seeming merely to set forth the facts.

Abolitionists faced a crisis of representation; Stephen Browne has argued that Theodore Weld's 1839 *American Slavery As It Is* was a response to that crisis. This graphic anthology, published by the American Anti-Slavery Society, assembles innumerable

firsthand accounts in an attempt to bring before the eyes of a northern audience the distant horrors of southern slavery. In his introduction, Weld begins by positioning his readers as "empannelled [sic]" jurors "to try a plain case and bring in an honest verdict." When Douglass invites his audience to "see men examined like horses; see the forms of women rudely and brutally exposed to the shocking gaze of American slave-buyers," he is similarly assigning to them roles as spectators.[46] Although Weld was constituting an audience of jurors, Douglass uses the silence and distance of irony to constitute mere observers; his white audience is asked not to judge—not yet—but merely to gaze. They are being forced to confront their own silent spectatorship.

The white people that Douglass presents to his white audience, the objects of identification that he offers them in his narrative, are a curiously inarticulate lot. They consist of those who do not comment on the internal slave trade, allowing the perpetrators to "pass without condemnation" (372), the slave agents who give "savage yells and … blood-chilling oaths" as they drive their slaves to market (373), and those who can be heard "announcing" their slaves for sale (374).[47] This vulgar inarticulateness, especially when coupled with an impotent reverence for the founders, renders the white observers just as mute as the black objects of their gaze. Neither can speak, but their relationship is not symmetrical. The blacks are muted because the whites remain silent, and the whites remain silent because they lack the ironic multiperspectivalism that would allow them to focus on the founders' irreverence. Douglass has supplied this ironic stance, first as a strategy through which to allow his white audience to recover the attitudes of the founders, and now as a strategy to force his audience to acknowledge its inconsistencies. Douglass directs the members of his audience to look, but he does not direct their judgment and does not explicitly tell them to juxtapose this description of the slave market against his earlier description of the patriotic public square. He merely places both images before their eyes so that the barbaric cruelty jars against the idyllic celebration. Cast as ironists, the white audience can observe the competing visions as they could not before but, as ironists, active judgment is impossible. Neither Douglass, nor the slaves, nor his white audience may speak. The scene is captioned only by the "doleful wail of fettered humanity" and the bestial commands of the brutalizers.

Collapsing Irony

The closing moments of Douglass's speech consist of denunciations of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and of the complacency of U.S. churches, a review of the central argument of his *narration*, a summary of his recently revised understanding of the Constitution, and a remarkable observation regarding the collapse of space and time as a consequence of modern technology. According to Fulkerson's mapping, these arguments span Douglass's *refutation* and *peroration*. I believe, however, that these passages together form a single rhetorical unit that marks an important peripety in the speech; specifically, they mark the passing of a time for irony. They signal the closing of the spatial and temporal distance that irony requires. Up to this point Douglass has worked to open the spatial and temporal distance that irony requires, but here he symbolically squeezes space and time, making an ironic attitude impossible to maintain.

Earlier in the speech, for example, when Douglass was describing the revolutionary daring of the founders, he noted that, in those days, the "population of the country … stood at the insignificant number of three millions," was "weak and scattered, and the country a wilderness unsubdued" with "no means of concert and combination."

Neither "steam nor lightening had then been reduced to order and discipline. From the Potomac to the Delaware was a journey of many days" (364). Such distance makes the actions of the founders all the more remarkable, of course; no prudent person would attempt to muster such a population into war against the planet's most powerful nation. These spatial images also emphasize the options available to the founders; they chose to imagine themselves a separate nation at a time when neither population density nor common grievances necessitated it.

In 1852, however, the options are dramatically narrowed. The Fugitive Slave Act is a "hell-black enactment" that obliterates distance and silences all participants. Through this act, "slavery has been nationalized in its most horrible and revolting form. By that act," Douglass continues, "Mason & Dixon's line has been obliterated, New York has become as Virginia," and slavery "is now an institution of the whole United States" and "co-extensive with the star-spangled banner [sic] and American Christianity" (375). Such circumstances negate the possibility for a moral audience to remain silent, yet this act allows only the foul to speak. Under its auspices, the black man's "own testimony is nothing. He can bring no witnesses for himself." Sympathetic whites are also silenced, just as they were when observing the slave trade, because the judge "is bound by the law to hear but one side; and that side, is the side of the oppressor" (375). This silencing, paradoxically, should be proclaimed: "Let this damning fact be perpetually told. Let it be thundered around the world, that, in tyrant-killing, king-hating, people-loving, democratic, Christian America, the seats of justice are filled with judges, who … are bound, in deciding in the case of a man's liberty, to hear only his accusers!" (376). Blacks, it is clear, cannot do this telling.

Although the Fugitive Slave Act has collapsed space, rendering white silence inappropriate, the U.S. churches remain mute. Douglass notes, for example, that the churches have remained utterly silent on the subject of the Fugitive Slave Law, although he is sure that if the law instead infringed on the "right to sing psalms, to partake of the sacrament, or to engage in any of the ceremonies of religion, it would be smitten by the thunder of a thousand pulpits" and denounced with a "general shout" (376). The U.S. church seems isolated because it has turned itself into "a religion for oppressors, tyrants, man-stealers, and thugs" (378) as opposed to the English church which was not silent, but demanded abolition and "true to its mission of ameliorating, elevating, and improving the condition of mankind, came forward promptly, bound up the wounds of the West Indian slave, and restored him to his liberty" (381).

Douglass here, for the first time in the speech, articulates the disjunction that has driven much of the text's imagery: "Americans! Your republican politics, not less than your republican religion, are flagrantly inconsistent" (382). In the shift from the implicit to the explicit, what was irony is now exigence.[48] Whites must not merely observe the inconsistencies, but act to redress them. Orators tell the "sad story" of "fallen Hungary," but "in regard to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the strictest silence" (382–383). Douglass reminds his white audience that

> you declare, before the world … that you '*hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that, among these are, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*'; and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which, according to Thomas Jefferson, '*is worse than ages of that which your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose,' a seventh part* of the inhabitants of your country. (383, emphasis in original)

Seeing the inconsistencies requires an ability to sustain attention simultaneously to

multiple juxtaposed images and a sort of quiet, uncommitted, and multiperspectival spectatorship. Maintaining this inconsistency, however, requires a ruinous detachment and amoral passivity. It

> brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a byword to a mocking earth." (383)

Earlier in the speech, irony was a prerequisite to understanding and employing the founders' appropriate/inappropriate actions in the present; now it is the root of an imposing evil.

In this context Douglass presents his anti-Garrisonian revision of the Constitution, declaring it a "glorious liberty document." To believe otherwise would be to label the founders "the veriest imposters that ever practised [sic] on mankind" and would constitute a "slander upon their memory" (384). This would be for whites to sustain an ironic distance between themselves and their heritage and leave them mute at a time that calls for judicious speech.

In the final moments of the text, Douglass declares a collapse of space and time that obliterates the distance that is necessary for the maintenance of ironic silence:

> No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world, and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done … . But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind … . Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together … . Space is comparatively annihilated. (387)

No longer are we, as auditors of this speech, in an era when the people, even within the U.S., are "weak and scattered" with "no means of concert and combination" (364). Today, "Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic are distinctly heard on the other," and the "far off and almost fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet." In such a world, "No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can how hide itself from the all-pervading light" (387).

Thus, the Fugitive Slave Act on the one hand and technological progress on the other squeeze the distance that irony requires. The North is no longer separate from the South; the U.S. church cannot be insulated from the example of the English church; the attitudes of the founders cannot be frozen by inappropriate reverence; and the white audience can no longer observe the present-day horrors from a safely muted distance. Douglass introduced his *confirmation* with the assertion that this was a time for irony; now, however, at the end of the speech, he has brought his audience to a time and place that render irony impossible.

Conclusion

Rhetoric is perhaps the most visual of the verbal arts, and rhetorical tropes and figures are often described through metaphors of sight. Burke, for example, describes his four "master tropes"—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—in explicitly visual terms. Metaphor is the trope of perspective, "a device for *seeing something* [my emphasis] *in terms of* [Burke's emphasis] something else."[49] Metonymy, which Burke describes as reduction, borrows words "from the realm of the corporeal, visible,

tangible" and applies them "by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible."[50] Metonymy, then, is a trope through which the invisible becomes visible. Synecdoche, similarly, is the trope though which a part is displayed for the whole, or the whole for the part. Metonymy and synecdoche are both, according to Burke, species of representation that establish relationships through which one thing presented to the eyes of an auditor can suggest another that is distant or withheld.

Irony is different, though no less visual. Burke explains that irony "arises when one tries, by the interaction of the terms upon one another, to produce a development which uses all the terms." Irony does not ask that one thing be seen in terms of another, or that one thing represent another, or that one thing be substituted for another. Rather, it asks that two or several things be presented before the auditor in the same place at the same time. It is a trope of multiple presences. Irony's essential simultaneity is a key distinction between it and Burke's other master tropes. Metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy all rely on sequence. The tenor and vehicle of metaphor cannot be presented simultaneously or at the same conceptual distance from the auditor, or the trope dissolves into ambiguity.[51] Similarly, for one thing to represent another either synecdochally or metonymically, both things cannot be equally present. In contrast, irony is non-linear, and this synchronic non-linearity of irony renders it perhaps the most visual of all of the tropes, the "perspective of perspectives" through which the others might be perceived. Irony's visuality is its promise and its danger because, as it invites us toward ever more complex vistas, it also constitutes us as passive spectators. Because it is non-linear, irony cannot set its audience on a trajectory toward moral judgment and action.

Rhetoric, however, is a temporal as well as a visual art. As rhetorical discourse unfolds through time, it also structures time; it invites its auditors to order their world as the discourse itself is ordered, and so draws some events and images into the past while pulling others into the present. Douglass situates attitudes toward irony within a temporal scheme, showing that some moments require irony while others make it impossible. Sometimes, the broadened liberal vistas and suspensions of judgment that are underwritten by an ironic attitude are precisely what are needed; sometimes, they must be rejected so that political action can occur. Douglass's speech sets these two attitudes in relationship with one another and, thus, makes irony available as a rhetorical resource. Through the temporal progression of his discourse, he suggests a way to tame this disruptive visual trope. Douglass does not present a new theory of irony; instead, he enacts a rhetorical practice of irony. He presents a productive relationship between figure and attitude, illustrating that a rhetorical understanding of discourse does not allow form and function to be cleaved asunder.

Douglass's speech begins by inviting his white audience toward a multiperspectivalism that holds in simultaneous focus the actions of the founders and their milieu, the founders and their audience, and in a doubled vision, the founders against themselves. Douglass does not ask that his audience contemplate the founders from the perspective of the present day or that the present should be contemplated in terms of the past. Rather, as Douglass puts it, "We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future" (366). Past and present must simultaneously be considered, so the productive ironic tensions can be discerned. The founders' actions were inappropriate, thus appropriate; they were insensitive to present circumstances, thus well-suited to them; they were imprudent, therefore prudent. The flexible adaptability of such a stance, however, can never be appropriated as a rhetorical model as long

as the founders' legacy is frozen in one-dimensional reverence; only the multi-layered simultaneity of irony can reveal the dynamic relationships and attitudes that Douglass's white audience must recover.

Having prepared the ground, Douglass next affronts the senses of his audience with a visual tour of the internal slave trade. Rational argument would be inappropriate; instead, Douglass declares: "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; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced" (371). The horrors that Douglass presents surely would quicken all but the most hardened apologist for slavery, yet the members of his white audience cannot respond to them. They perceive only the accommodation of the founders, and cannot appreciate their audacity.[52] As long as his audience imagines that the founders' genius was a narrow sense of decorum and prudence, they cannot voice the critique called for by the scenes that Douglass presents.

Finally, at the end of the speech, Douglass shuts down the space that irony requires. This obliteration of space and time, the result of virulent legislation and technological progress, renders the ironic stance of mute detachment impossible. Judgment and action must take place; there is neither room for mere observation nor time for inactive contemplation. Ironic detachment is necessary to discern the available possibilities; the collapse of irony is necessary to provoke action.

In this way, Douglass's temporal management of irony models a productive rapprochement between the two dysfunctional responses to irony with which I began this essay. Those responses are based on and embodied by two studies that capture well irony's potentials and liabilities: Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and Jedediah Purdy's *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*.[53] Rorty sees contemporary culture as having neglected irony and, thus, as suffering from a tyranny of metaphysics. He imagines a perfected culture based on a "liberal irony" characterized by a detailed attention to surface appearances rather than a compulsive attempt to discover the "intrinsic nature" or "real essence" of a thing. Liberal ironists, in Rorty's account, do not believe that such finite essences exist; rather, they believe that the vocabularies that describe such essences are constructions that may or may not be useful at a given time. This ironic attitude invites audiences to discern many such vocabularies in close juxtaposition. "Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them," Rorty argues, "criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original." Irony is liberatory in its rejection of final, essential grounds. Rorty sees irony as an antidote for a world that has forgotten how to maintain a productive disjunction between ideas and things; for him, the "opposite of irony is common sense."[54]

In distinct contrast to Rorty, Jedediah Purdy perceives our current age as steeped in and defined by irony. Whereas Rorty "cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth" into an ironic attitude, making them "continually dubious about their own process of socialization,"[55] Purdy sees "media-savvy young people" being schooled in the ways of irony; indeed, he argues that the "more time one has spent in school, and the more expensive the school, the greater the propensity to irony." Purdy yearns for a return to a non-ironic age (perhaps a pre-ironic age, although he claims that he is not nostalgic) characterized by devotion and dignity rather than by the ironic distancing that he calls "avoiding the world." He longs for "a kind of thought and action that is too little contemplated" in our ironic age, neglected in place of a detached and "eager

acquiescence" to the idea that nothing really matters.[56] He sees the antidote to pervasive irony in a coherence between ideas and things, a return to common sense.

Purdy and Rorty agree about one aspect of the political prospects for irony: neither thinks that the ironic attitude can nourish a republican motive sufficient, by itself, to produce a moral and productive culture. Douglass repairs this deficiency, not by integrating Purdy's Erewhon and Rorty's Utopia, but by acknowledging and engaging both ironic attitudes; Douglass exploits irony's considerable liberatory potential and demonstrates the danger of its infinite seduction. He shows that there is a time for ironic disconnection and there is a time for a return to common sense, and he helps his audience to know one time from the other. In the process, he also repairs the lopsided disconnection between ironic figure and ironic attitude because he makes use of the first to effect the second. His ironic rhetorical practice is intended to produce, in his audience, an ironic political attitude, at least temporarily, and thus draws figure and attitude into a dynamic relationship.

"It is the business of the ironologist," Muecke contends, "to prepare the ground for a complete account,"[57] and so irony prepares the ground for judgment. Irony is inactive, mute, and self-indulgent, but it also is expansive and multivisual. The withdrawal and detachment associated with irony can nourish a withdrawal and detachment that is preliminary to judgment. One must exit the fray in order to see the available means within it. Irony is not judgment, if we understand judgment to be manifest as action in the world. Irony may have an "edge," as Hutcheon puts it, but it does not generate the kinetic energy required to wield that edge as a political strategy. Ironists and their audiences may be invited toward insight, but they are not incited to action. The scopic pleasures of irony can be a powerful narcotic, and the antidote entails the collapse of the distances that irony inhabits. Thus, the political potentials of irony are animated by a dilemma: irony that would be politically productive cannot be sustained indefinitely because it must find its culmination in action, but action spells the end of irony. This sort of ironic distance is not the same as Enlightenment objectivity because it is self-consciously temporary; its purpose is to engage contingency for political ends, not to discover immutable truths. Irony turned toward political ends, then, is sacrificial, calling for its own termination. Douglass, through his manipulation of space and time over the temporal progression of this speech, offers his (white) audience both narcotic and goad, bidding them to observe passively their own inconsistencies and then actively to redress them.

Douglass was speaking to a time of crisis. The sectionally-divided vote that defeated the Wilmot Proviso in 1846, the so-called Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, "Bleeding Kansas" in 1856, the Dred Scott decision in 1857, and the fragmented election of 1860—with the gift of more than a century and a half of hindsight, these events trace a trajectory that seems to lead inexorably to the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861. Less than a decade after Douglass spoke, the time for irony seemed to have passed. The value of Douglass's address on the fifth of July 1852, however, is not its clairvoyance. It is not, or at least not entirely, in Douglass's masterful response to the exigence that presented itself to him; rather it is in the way that Douglass's address is an exemplary model of the potential for rhetoric to be a cultural and political resource. His speech illustrates the way in which rhetoric might manage crises, situating them in time so that they can be named and addressed. Douglass offers his audience a rehearsal for crisis, training them in an art of ironic contemplation and then demonstrating the need to know when such contemplation must end. When it is

time, they will be ready. His speech reminds us that moments of *kairos* are not merely stumbled across, but are called forth through discourse. The study of public address may not be the only way to become schooled in such strategies or to observe such innovations. Because tropes and crises are invented through rhetoric, however, the study of public address is perhaps the richest and potentially most rewarding way to do so. My argument, in this sense, redoubles that of Douglass: the critical recovery of discourses of the past is essential to the continued vitality of the present.

Notes

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[1] The most recent example of an irony-ending event, as I write this, is the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. One of the most widely cited of irony's obituaries following this event is Roger Rosenblatt, "The Age of Irony Comes to an End: No Longer Will We Fail to Take Things Seriously," *Time*, 24 September 2001, 79. Two thoughtful responses to this obituary include David Beers, "Irony is Dead! Long Live Irony!" Salon.com, 25 September 2001 < http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/ irony lives/print.html >(Retrieved 15 November 2002); Tim Cavanaugh, "Ironic Engagement: The Hidden Agenda of the Anti-Ironists," *Reason Online*, December 2001 < http://reason.com/0112/ co.tc.rant.shtml >(Retrieved 3 November 2002).

[2] On the relationship between an ironic attitude and theater spectatorship, see D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), 223.

[3] Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 220.

[4] "If you will pardon the inelegant terms, irony can only 'complexify'; it can never 'disambiguate,' " in Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

[5] Michael Leff, "Cicero's Pro Murena and the Strong Case for Rhetoric," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 1 (1998): 64. Leff is quoting Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 189.

[6] Wayne Booth notes, "From the beginning, apparently, the word [irony] tended to get itself attached to a type of character … rather than to any one device." In *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 138–39.

[7] Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 138–41. Peter L. Oesterreich suggests that for Kenneth Burke, similarly, "Irony represents the typical shape of the liberal, enlightened intellect, in contrast to the metaphor, the metonymy, or the synecdoche, expressed in the naïve consciousness of mythological worldviews." Oesterreich also offers a useful thumbnail sketch of Romantic and postmodern conceptions of irony, both of which imply that contemporary culture is, or ought to be understood as, fundamentally ironic. In Peter L. Oesterreich, "Irony," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 404–6.

[8] Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 94.

[9] Richard Harvey Brown, *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason, and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 186–90.

[10] On the potential of rhetoric to have a temporalizing effect, see Michael C. Leff, "Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G. P. Mohrmann," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (1986): 377–89; J. Robert Cox, "The Fulfillment of Time: King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech (August 28, 1963)," in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 181–204; Robert Hariman, "Time and the Reconstitution of Gradualism in King's Address: A Response to Cox," in *Texts in Context*, 205–17; Randall A. Lake, "Between Myth and History: Enacting Time in Native American Protest Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 123–51.

[11] Parataxis, as Richard Lanham defines it, generally refers to "Clauses or phrases arranged independently (a coordinate, rather than a subordinate, construction), sometimes, as here, without the customary connectives: 'I came, I saw, I conquered.'" In *A Handbook of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 108. James Jasinski refers to parataxis as an intermediate stylistic pattern, resident at the level of the sentence or paragraph. In *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 539–40. Here I enlarge parataxis to refer to a more general strategy of rhetorical juxtaposition in which images are placed next to one another in discourse without explicit information about their relationship. For similar usage, see Robert Hariman, "Allegory and Democratic Public Culture in the Postmodern Era," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35 (2002): 267–96.

[12] There does not seem to be a consensus on why this speech was delivered on July 5 instead of on July 4. Neil Leroux states that "Since Independence Day fell on Sunday, many July 4 celebrations were held on the following day." In "Frederick Douglass and the Attention Shift," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 21 (1991): 36. William S. McFeely suggests instead that the July 5 date was Douglas's choice: "Douglass was writing the speech in response to an invitation from the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society to give an oration in Corinthian Hall on the fourth of July. He agreed to speak, but not on that date." In *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 172.

[13] McFeely, 173.

[14] In David B. Chesebrough, *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 19.

[15] See Kurt Müller, "Anti-Slavery Rhetoric on the Fourth of July: William Lloyd Garrison," in *The Fourth of July: Political Oratory and Literary Reactions*, 1776 1876, ed. P. Goetsch and G. Hurm (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter NarrVerlag, 1992), 121–38.

[16] As Kevin R. McClure notes, a brief but useful discussion of Douglass's evolving understanding of the Constitution is found in David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 26–34. In Kevin R. McClure, "Frederick Douglass' Use of Comparison in his Fourth of July Oration: A Textual Criticism," *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (2000): 425–26.

[17] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "A Dangerous Literacy: The Legacy of Frederick Douglass," *New York Times Book Review*, 28 March 1995, 3, 16.

[18] John Louis Lucaites, "The Irony of 'Equality' in Black Abolitionist Discourse: The Case of Frederick Douglass's 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?'" in *Rhetoric and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 49. See

also James Jasinski, "Rearticulating History in Epideictic Discourse: Frederick Douglass's 'The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro,' " in *Rhetoric and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, 71 89; Leroux, "Frederick Douglass and the Attention Shift," 36–46.

[19] Lucaites, "Irony of 'Equality,'" 49; Eric J. Sundquist, "Frederick Douglass: Literacy and Paternalism," in *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*, ed. W. L. Andrews (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 129.

[20] Bernard W. Bell, "The African-American Jeremiad and Frederick Douglass' Fourth of July 1852 Speech," in *The Fourth of July: Political Oratory and Literary Reactions*, 1776 1876, ed. P. Goetsch and G. Hurm (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992), 139–53; McClure, "Frederick Douglass' Use of Comparison," 425–45; Gregory Stephens, "Frederick Douglass' Multiracial Abolitionism: 'Antagonistic Cooperation' and 'Redeemable Ideals' in the July 5 Speech," *Communication Studies* 48 (1997):175–94. Stephens provides an extended discussion in *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Douglass's rhetoric is replete with doubled figures, multiperspectival attitudes, and irony, and the July 5 speech condenses eloquently many of the characteristics of Douglass's oratory. On irony as a recurring motif in Douglass's rhetoric, see Gerald Fulkerson, "Frederick Douglass," in *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Richard W. Leeman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 91–92.

[21] Fulkerson, "Frederick Douglass," 91–92.

[22] I am indebted to Professor Stephen Lucas, who in response to an earlier draft of this essay suggested that I attend more carefully to the classical divisions of Douglass's speech.

[23] Jasinski, "Rearticulating History in Epideictic Discourse," 80.

[24] Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 83. Behler is discussing the literary theories of Friedrich Schlegel. Muecker makes a similar point: "The opposition of points of view which the irony presents is paralleled by a tension between the ironist's sense of his own position, that is, his attitude and his feelings as an observer, and his sense of the victim's position." In *Compass of Irony*, 218.

[25] Fulkerson reports that this address was "meticulously written and delivered from manuscript" in contrast to most of Douglass's speeches, which were delivered extemporaneously. Fulkerson, "Frederick Douglass," 91.

[26] Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers* Vol. 2, ed. J. W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 359. All subsequent references to this speech text are in parentheses in the text.

[27] On the specific generic expectations of a fourth of July oration, see Howard. H. Martin, "The Fourth of July Oration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 44 (1958): 393–401. For an insightful study of the rituals associated with early fourth of July celebrations generally, see Len Travers, Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 41–54. See also Kurt W. Ritter and James R. Andrews, *The American Ideology: Reflections of the Revolution in American Rhetoric* (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1978).

[28] Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 60. Similarly, Richard Harvey Brown notes: "Irony is not merely stating the opposite of what one means, for by such a definition irony would be no more than lying. Instead, the ironist … simultaneously asserts two or more logically contradictory meanings such that, in the silence between the two, the deeper meaning of both may emerge" (*Society as Text*, 173).

[29] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 1127b.23–27. Behler suggests that Aristotle's formulation here and his explicit reference to Socrates as a representative ironic figure is the foundational classical expression of irony (*Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, 79).

[30] Hutcheon reminds us that irony happens in the minds of auditors: "[T]here is no guarantee that the interpreter will 'get' the irony in the same way as it was intended. In fact, 'get' may be an inaccurate and even inappropriate verb: 'make' would be much more precise" (*Irony's Edge*, 11).

[31] Frederick Douglass, 172.

[32] Several critics have noted the ironic framework of Douglass's exordium. John Lucaites, for example, suggests that Douglass's opening is both "rather conventional" and "subtly … ironic" ("The Irony of 'Equality,'" 57). Kevin McClure suggests that Douglass is "in the process of developing a new line of argument that simultaneously affirms" fundamental U.S. values while "condemning the hypocrisy of the celebration" (McClure, "Frederick Douglass' Use of Comparison," 433).

[33] John W. Blassingame argues: "Douglass exaggerated the restrictions placed on him during the first months as an antislavery lecturer," and suggests that the abolitionists actually "advised him not to give the details of his slave experience for fear that he might be recaptured." "Introduction to Series One," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches Debates, and Interviews: Volume 1: 1841-46* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), xlviii. Douglass's earliest recorded speeches support Blassingame's assertion, but they also exhibit a dearth of the interpretive critique for which Douglass's later speeches would be famous.

[34] T. Gregory Garvey, "Frederick Douglass's Change of Opinion on the U.S. Constitution: Abolitionism and the 'Elements of Moral Power,' " *American Transcendental Quarterly* 9 (1995): 234.

[35] Fulkerson, "Frederick Douglass," 91. Stephens counts 45 such instances in the speech, of which 17 are references to "your fathers." In "Frederick Douglass' Multiracial Abolitionism," 184. The distance required by irony may require the ironist to position her/himself as an outsider, someone not integrated into the community, yet not fully estranged from it. See Jacqueline Bacon, "Do you understand your own language?: Revolutionary Topoi in the Rhetoric of African-American Abolitionists," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 28 (1998): 60. In the July 5 speech, Douglass never abandons the distancing pronouns "you" and "yours" but holds them in tension against the "fellow citizens" he is addressing. His ironic stance is consistent. It is not Douglass who must embrace, then relinquish irony, but his white listeners.

[36] Leroux, "Frederick Douglass and the Attention Shift," 40.

[37] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 19–23.

[38] Brown, *Society as Text*, 179.

[39] Jasinski, "Rearticulating History in Epideictic," 72.

[40] Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 23.

[41] See Kenneth Burke's discussion of "act" and "scene" in *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 3–15.

[42] Some subtle irony pervades even this portrayal of the Declaration because the ring-bolts and chains suggest the images of slavery that Douglass will present to his audience.

[43] Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1995), 7. Jasinski notes that by the middle of the nineteenth century the revolutionary tradition had been constructed as "rational, inevitable, natural, orderly, and conservative; the revolution had become, in a word, domesticated" ("Rearticulating History in Epideictic," 78). An anonymous *QJS* reviewer indicated that more notable discourses of post-revolutionary preservation include Daniel Webster's 1825 "Bunker Hill Monument Address," in *Three Centuries of American Rhetorical Discourse: An Anthology and Review*, ed. Ronald F. Reid (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1988), 207–25, and Lincoln's 1838 "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Cleveland: World, 1946), 76–85.

[44] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., citing Peter Walker, reports that for a time soon after Douglass's break with Garrison he actually lost his physical voice and became "unable for an extended time to utter even one syllable." In *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 120; Peter Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Letters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1979).

[45] Leroux, "Frederick Douglass and the Attention Shift," 42.

[46] Stephen H. Browne, "'Like Gory Spectres': Representing Evil in Theodore Weld's American Slavery As It Is," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 277–92; Theodore Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 7. Douglass's use of asyndeton throughout these passages heightens the paratactic effect of the series of images.

[47] The only exception is Douglass's "mistress" — although unnamed, surely Sophia Auld — who comforts him by saying that "the custom was very wicked" and that she hated to hear "the rattle of the chains, and the heart-rending cries." "I was glad," Douglass notes, "to find one who sympathised [sic] with me in my horror" (374). It is significant, perhaps, that the only sympathetic white voice that Douglass presents is a voice that is similarly oppressed and disenfranchised in the nineteenth-century U.S.

[48] Oesterreich succinctly states a universally recognized facet of irony, that "irony conveys meaning by indirect reference rather than by direct statement" ("Irony," 404). Earlier in the speech, when Douglass was suppressing his own voice and making his point indirectly, we were in the realm of irony; here, when Douglass asserts his own voice and articulates his argument explicitly, we no longer are in the realm of irony.

[49] Burke, *Grammar*, 503.

[50] Burke, *Grammar*, 506.

[51] For example, take the well-known metaphor from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech: "We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation." The audience is asked to see the tenor (the U.S. cultural myth of unlimited opportunity) in terms of the vehicle (a bank vault), so that some of the associations connected with "bank vault" might be transferred to "opportunity." If the two images were presented in such a way that the audience did not understand that the bank vault was in the background as a source of connotative transference, the metaphor would be unintelligible. See Michael M. Osborn and Douglas Ehninger, "The Metaphor in Public Address," *Speech Monographs* 29 (1962): 223–34. The quotation from King's speech is from James M. Washington, ed., *I*

Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 102.

[52] Jasinski has differentiated "accommodation" and "audacity" as two forms of prudence, and argues that for the post-revolutionary generation these two senses of prudence had ceased to co-exist in a dynamic symbiosis but instead had calcified into a dysfunctional polarization. That generation thus found it impossible to emulate the audacity of the founders, and instead shouldered itself with the burden of accommodation. Re-establishing the dynamism between audacity and accommodation would require understanding the founders as both prudent and imprudent, as Douglass seems to be urging his audience to do. See Jasinski, "Idioms of Prudence in Three Antebellum Controversies: Revolution, Constitution, and Slavery," in *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice*, ed. Robert Hariman (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 168–78. I thank one of the anonymous QJS reviewers for pointing out this connection to Jasinski's essay.

[53] James P. McDaniel offers a similar, although more thorough, comparison of the ironies of Purdy and Rorty in "'Liberal Irony': A Program for Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35 (2002): 297–327. I am indebted to McDaniel for allowing me to read his essay in manuscript, as well as for reading a draft of this essay and offering insightful comment.

[54] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 74, 80.

[55] Rorty, *Contingency*, 87.

[56] Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 207, 10.

[57] Muecke, *Compass of Irony*, 5.