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WATER: A RECURRING IMAGE IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS' *NARRATIVE*

BY WILLIAM D. SMYTH

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* has been the subject of many critical works by several contemporary scholars of black literature. Robert Stepto, Albert Stone, Jean Yellin, Benjamin Quarles, Houston Baker, Arna Bontemps, Benjamin Brawley, and many others have all written about it. As an important literary and historical autobiography and as the most important slave narrative, the one that has historically defined all others, Douglass' *Narrative* has not been overlooked. Yet, for all the insight generated from the narrative, little has been mentioned about the recurring image of water and all that is related to it—the ships, the shipyards, and sailing—and nothing has been written linking these images to the major turning points in the narrative.¹ It is this theme, then, that this paper addresses.

Within the first few pages of the narrative, the reader is introduced to two of the most important bodies of water in Douglass' world, the Chesapeake Bay and the Miles River. The Chesapeake Bay, that vast body of water separating Maryland and Virginia and the highway to points north such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, enamored him. Boats came and went up the bay to the Miles River and to the Choptank River, which borders Talbot County, the county which includes Easton and, twelve miles outside of it, Tuckahoe Plantation, where Douglass spent the earliest years of his life. The Miles, the Choptank, and the Chesapeake connected Tuckahoe to the outside world. They were

¹ Albert Stone comes closer than anyone to discussing this significant theme in his article "Identity and Art in Frederick Douglass's 'Narrative,'" *CLA Journal*, 17 (1973), 192-213.

its lifeblood.

It is no wonder, then, that Douglass introduces his first master, Captain Anthony, in relation to the Chesapeake Bay.² He is "Captain" Anthony, not "Master" Anthony, and Douglass presumes that he acquired his title by sailing a craft on the Chesapeake Bay.³ This presumption is most likely inaccurate, although Douglass does not realize it, because the reader is told that Anthony was Colonel Edward Lloyd's clerk and superintendent. Furthermore, it was Captain Anthony's son-in-law, Thomas Auld, who was actually a captain, captain of the sloop *Sally Lloyd*, named in honor of one of the colonel's daughters and manned by Peter, Isaac, Rich, and Jake, four of the colonel's own slaves (p. 27). The title of "Captain" prefacing Anthony's name most assuredly came from his position as overseer of the overseers. He was the "boss" of the twenty to thirty plantations Colonel Lloyd owned. Yet this role of Anthony's does not enter Douglass' mind at the narrative's beginning. To him, Anthony is a man defined by some illusory role to the bay.

Because water is everywhere and Douglass thinks in terms of it, he describes many places where he lives by their proximity to water. Tuckahoe is "bordered by" the Choptank. Great House Farm, Lloyd's main plantation, "is situated on" the Wye River and is "on the border of" the Miles River (p. 27).⁴ Douglass remembers the area between

² This is Captain Aaron Anthony. Douglass' two later autobiographies—*My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, first published in 1881 and reissued in 1892—flesh out the details left out of the first narrative. Douglass does not include Anthony's name in the 1845 narrative because he says that he cannot remember it.

³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; rpt. New York: Signet, 1968), p. 27. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference only.

⁴ While the Wye and Choptank are not mentioned in the 1845 *Narrative*, they appear in the later narratives. See Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom*, (1855; rpt. New York: Arna, 1958), p. 43, and his *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; rpt. New York: Collier, 1962), p. 27. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *BF* and *LT*, respectively, followed by the page number(s).

the Miles and the Wye as Long Point, a stretch of land with a large windmill with “wide-sweeping white wings.” He recalls that in one of the rivers known as the “Swash” lay the *Sally Lloyd*. Situated a short distance from shore, the sloop quietly lay at anchor with her small rowboat dancing at her stern. These two objects, Douglass confesses, awakened thoughts, ideas, and wonderings (*LT*, p. 39). Just what those thoughts, ideas, and wonderings were, he does not say, but as Albert Stone so aptly puts it, “Douglass’ deepest impulses towards freedom, personal identity, and self-expression are fused and represented in these memories and images of ships and the sea.”⁵

If Douglass’ thoughts, ideas, and wonderings can be seen as one of the earliest turning points toward freedom, personal identity, and self-expression, and I think that they can, certainly two other incidents which occurred at roughly the same time can be seen as early turning points also.⁶ Both have something to do with water but not “water” as one might think of it. These two incidents involve tears.

The first incident that Douglass relates is the case of a young woman, a cousin of his, who was beaten by a man named Plummer, the overseer at Tuckahoe. Bloodied and covered with scars, she walked twelve miles to appeal to Captain Anthony, who turned her away with the stern remark that she probably deserved every bit of it.

The second incident pertains to Anthony’s whippings of Aunt Hester (spelled Esther in some versions). Aunt Hester disobeyed Anthony by leaving that plantation and seeing Ned Roberts, the one she loved. Anthony caught her, stripped her to the waist, tied her with a strong rope to a hook in a joist in the kitchen ceiling, and whipped her severely. “No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory vic-

⁵ Albert E. Stone, “Identity and Art in Frederick Douglass’s ‘Narrative,’” *CLA Journal*, 17 (1973), 207.

⁶ The three versions of Douglass’ narrative place the following incidents in slightly different order.

tim, seemed to move his [Anthony's] iron heart from its bloody purpose," Douglass states (pp. 24-25). Of this shocking incident, and really both incidents, he says it was a "blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery" through which he passed (p. 25). Never had he seen such barbarity. The sight terrified and horrified him. Surely, such screams and tears moved him one step closer to freedom.

Douglass talks about tears from crying children who saw another overseer named Mr. Severe whip their mother (p. 29). He mentions the tears that flowed to relieve an aching heart. They were not unlike the songs sung to express the sorrows in the heart (p. 32). These wild, moanful songs reverberated through the woods. Songs, like tears, came from "souls boiling over" (p. 31). Douglass himself says, "I have often sung to drown my sorrows" (p. 32). (Note the words "boiling" and "drowns" that he uses.) Even as he writes the narrative, "an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek," Douglass admits. The mere recurrence of the songs afflicts him, and to these songs he traces his first conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery (p. 32).

Douglass' use of images that conjoin past and present, as well as his use of introspective analysis, speaks of his evolution from slavery to freedom.⁷ Each image and each analysis reveals his merging comprehension of freedom and literacy. Every page of the narrative unfolds one more self-realization. The reader can see Douglass coming to terms with his own identity—a boy who is a slave for life but who already sees the gross injustices of the institution.

Nowhere is this better seen than in Douglass' account of Demby and the slave who was killed by Beal Bondly. Demby, the reader is told, did something to raise the ire of

⁷ Robert B. Stepto, "Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass' 'Narrative' of 1845," in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto (New York: MLA, 1979), p. 185.

Mr. Gore, another overseer. Gore undertook to whip him, and Demby, after a few stripes, plunged into a nearby body of water—a creek. Gore told him to come out or he would kill him. When Demby did not move, Gore shot him (p. 40).

Another one of Colonel Lloyd's slaves died in the water. An old man, Douglass tells the reader, was fishing for oysters. He went beyond the limits of Colonel Lloyd's property and trespassed on Bondly's premises. At this, Bondly took offense and with his musket "blew its deadly contents into the poor old man" (p. 42). Douglass realizes that he could have been in the position of either slave, and once again the mode of water transports him further on his quest for freedom.

A creek appears one more time as a convenient setting. This time it is the backdrop for a major turning point. Douglass relates that he had been told that he was to go to Baltimore to live with Hugh Auld, the brother of Captain Anthony's son-in-law. In preparation, he had to scrub off the plantation scurf that had accumulated for seven-to-eight years. This was no mean task, for it took the better part of three days. Not unlike a baptism, Douglass had to go down into the water to come out of it a new, regenerated person. Thus, a former life passed away while a new chapter began to unfold. Douglass scrubbed away in earnest because for the first time he had "the hope of reward" (p. 44).

Douglass sailed out of the Miles River for Baltimore on a Saturday morning (p. 45). It is interesting that he remembered the exact day of the week, a sign that this was a very important event in his life. On setting sail, he says, he walked aft to look at Lloyd's plantation one more time. This was not an act of nostalgia because he states that the ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in his case (p. 44). Rather, it was a gesture of relief. As Douglass says, he hoped that this look would be the last ever made of the plantation (p. 45).

Turning, then, from the stern of the sloop, Douglass placed himself in the bow. Whereas he had walked to the

back momentarily for only a parting view, he now anchored himself in the front and remained steadfast. There he spent the remainder of the day looking ahead and interesting himself "in what was in the distance rather than in things near by or behind" (pp. 45-46). Literally and figuratively, Douglass embarked on a new phase of his life. In his words, "Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway" (p. 46).

Within twenty-four hours, the sloop arrived in Baltimore and landed at Smith's Wharf, not far from Bowley's Wharf. Rich, one of the hands, conducted Douglass to his new home on Allicians Street, which was near Gardner's Shipyard. Douglass does not relate any more information than that. Thus, the details he gives are just as important as the details he leaves out. In his mind, telling the name of the wharf and the name of the nearby shipyard at Fell's Point are the two most important facts he wants to mention. These two geographic sites define the new parameters of his life.

The Baltimore waterfront played the central role in Douglass' life for the next few years. Here he met some boys who lived on Philpot Street near Durgin and Bailey's Shipyard. For pieces of bread, they taught Douglass how to read. This bread of knowledge, as he puts it, led him to abhor and detest his enslavers. It gave him a view of his wretched condition without the remedy. It opened his eyes "to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out" (p. 55).

Along the same waterfront and on the wharf of Mr. Waters, a man with a highly symbolic name, Douglass met two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone. Helping them with their task, he was asked by one of them, "Are ye a slave for life?" (p. 56). He told them that he was. Their pity for him and their advice to him to run away had a tremendous effect on him. Although not admitting it to them, Douglass, from that time, resolved to run away (p. 57).

Everything Douglass saw, heard, or read enlarged his

knowledge of life. His time in Baltimore, for example, was a “school” for him. Here, for the first time, he saw free blacks, and the coming and going of ships gave him his first ideas of direction and distance. Here, too, he met immigrants like the two Irishmen who encouraged him to escape. All of this turned Douglass’ head steadily north and awakened in him many thoughts that led him out of bondage.⁸

It is no surprise that it was down at the shipyard that Douglass learned to write. The germ of the idea began there when he saw ship carpenters marking pieces of timber with the letters “L” and “S” for “larboard” and “starboard.” He quickly learned that “F” and “A” stood for forward and aft and that combinations of these letters designated where on board the timber was to go. Such an achievement was both an historical and symbolic event as Stone points out: “In recording an actual occurrence, one which connects the twelve-year-old boy to the present writer in Lynn, [Douglass] continues a pattern of event and image linked together to articulate his autobiographical identity.”⁹

At this point in the *Narrative*, Douglass mentions three trips made on schooners and sloops, each of which heightened his awareness that he was a slave. The first voyage aboard the schooner *Wild Cat* with Captain Rowe brought him back near the place of his birth. Captain Anthony and his son Richard had just died, and all the slaves had to return to be evaluated as property that they might be divided evenly between Mrs. Lucretia and Master Andrew, Anthony’s two surviving children. One month later, Douglass returned to Baltimore as he had fallen to the portion of Mrs. Lucretia, and she allowed him to return to Hugh Auld. However, Lucretia and Andrew soon died, and Lucretia’s husband, Thomas, fell out with his brother Hugh. The result found Douglass once again on a sloop, the

⁸ Booker T. Washington, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Haskell House, 1968), p. 45.

⁹ Stone, p. 206.

Amanda, which was captured by Edward Dodson and headed to St. Michael's. On this passage he paid particular attention to the direction that the steamboats took to go to Philadelphia and found that instead of going down on reaching North Point, they went up the bay in a north-easterly direction (p. 64). Douglass' determination to run away was again revived.

Trips south, north, and south again are characterized by Douglass' despair, hope, and ultimate despair. Not only did he agonize over his own lot, but he was especially anxious for members of his own family, especially his grandmother. Following Lucretia and Andrew's deaths, all of the property, slaves included, Douglass recalls, was in the hands of strangers, "strangers who had nothing to do with accumulating it" (p. 61). The new owner of his grandmother, finding her of little value, took her to the woods, built her a little hut, and left her to die. Of this treatment, Douglass laments, "She gropes her way, in the darkness of age, for a drink of water" (p. 62). Not only did she thirst for physical water, but she thirsted for freedom. Unable to get either, she died. Douglass goes on to say that no one wiped the cold sweat of death from her brow (p. 63), yet his grandmother wiped the cold death-sweat from the icy brow of her master (p. 61). His irony does not go unnoticed, and he makes a powerful statement in relating the entire episode to the reader.

Now as the property of Captain Auld—a man described by Douglass as "master only of a Bay craft" (p. 66) and as one who "experienced religion" at a camp meeting held in the Bay-side (p. 67)—Douglass found his circumstances quite unbearable. He was constantly hungry, and Auld drove his slaves hard and acted capriciously. He and Douglass had quite a number of differences, and Auld finally found him unsuited for his purposes. His solution was to hire him out to Edward Covey, a "nigger-breaker."

Therefore, nine months after arriving in St. Michael's, Douglass went to live with Covey. During a period of ap-

proximately three years, he had been back and forth between Baltimore and the Eastern Shore. Most recently coming south to St. Michael's, he now found himself further "south." Longing to go north, he was only more entrenched in slavery. The scene was therefore set for a major confrontation: "Like a fish in a net," he writes, "I was now drawn rapidly to the shore, secured at all points" (*BF*, p. 206).

Observing his surroundings, Douglass describes Covey's property in typical fashion:

The Chesapeake bay—upon the jutting banks of which the little wood-colored house was standing—white with foam, raised by the heavy north-west wind; Poplar Island, covered with a thick, black pine forest, stretching its sandy, desert-like shores out into the foam-crested bay,—were all in sight, and deepened the wild and desolate aspects of my new home. (*BF*, p. 207)

And then of the Chesapeake, itself, Douglass writes:

Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. (pp. 75-76)

No such elegant piece of heart-felt and poured-forth prose exists anywhere else in the entire narrative. Every word is significant. Douglass speaks of the bay as a bosom, which harbors the heart, the soul, and mother's milk. All had been wrenched from him: he was motherless and without family, and he was broken in body, soul, and spirit (p. 75). The overwhelming effect of fifteen or sixteen years of slavery had taken its toll, and Douglass says that it prompted him almost to take his life (p. 75).

Not only was the bay a bosom, but it was a broad bosom, broad enough to encompass the whole of motherless (and fatherless) humanity and provide a safe harbor from the storms of life. The picture is one of inclusivity and not ex-

clusivity. In reaching out, it sheltered all.

Douglass says that this broad bosom was ever white—not from foam generated from turbulent seas but with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. White being the color of purity and holiness, it obviously had some powerful, personal associations for him. After all, white people were free, and Mrs. Hugh Auld, “a [white] woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings,” started him on the voyage to a free self by teaching him to read, which Douglass described as the road from slavery to freedom (pp. 48-49).¹⁰

Douglass' use of contrast only underscores his already powerful images. Beautiful vessels robed in white delighted the eye of the freemen, he writes, but to him (and other slaves in bondage) they were so many shrouded ghosts terrifying and tormenting him with thoughts of his wretched condition (p. 76). Not only does Douglass juxtapose robed vessels with shrouded ones, but he says that the robed ones delighted while the shrouded ones terrified and tormented. His binary opposition is effective, for the impact of his words moves the reader as much as the sight of the ships moving off to the mighty ocean stirred him. In fact, Douglass was so disturbed and felt so utterly helpless that he poured out his soul's complaint with a passionate apostrophe (p. 76).

The apostrophe reveals Douglass' utter despair and his dichotomous condition.¹¹ He was so delirious that he could hardly think straight, and his thoughts came rushing forth in pell-mell fashion. His three carefully worded binary oppositions are abandoned to sudden outbursts punctuated by exclamation marks and question marks. Calling the ships “swift-winged angels” that fly around the world, he wished that he were on their decks and under their protecting wings, but because that was not possible, he wished he

¹⁰ Also, see Stone, p. 207.

¹¹ Houston A. Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 35.

could swim or fly. Then knowing that he must remain “in hands of iron” and “before the bloody whip,” he despaired, “Why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute!” And he said that he was left in the “hottest hell” (p. 76).¹²

Never had Douglass reached such a low ebb. Never had his cry been so pitiful. Totally without hope, he determined to reverse his life’s course. He could go no further down; he could only go up. As Douglass reasoned, “I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing” (p. 76). He will take to the water. If the very ships that sail toward the horizon, hiding in the dim distance, will not transport him, he will take to the bay in a canoe, steer in a northeast direction from North Point, and head straight through Delaware into Pennsylvania. Thus, he tells us, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (p. 77).¹³ With this major turning point, Douglass moved closer to discovering his personal identity and to the ever sought-after freedom he so much desired.

Douglass began to prepare himself for the final episode in his quest for freedom while employed to Mr. Freeland. Not content to live with Freeland, Douglass wanted to live “upon free land” (p. 91). Such syncretic phrasing is effective. Riddled with irony, the play on the oppressor’s name shows Douglass’ wit and increasing facility with language as

¹² Houston Baker and James Olney offer two ideas to explain apostrophes like this. Baker reasons that black, Southern field slaves had scarcely any *a priori* assumptions to act as stays in their quest for self-definition, so they were moved to introspection by the apparent “blankness” that surrounded them. He goes on to say that slaves were men and women of the diaspora, displaced persons imprisoned by an inhuman system. Olney speaks of the rich mixture of persons, places, sights, acts, and emotions which combine in the autobiographer’s memory to become a “metaphor of self.” See Baker, p. 30, and James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 30-31.

¹³ For an interesting comment on this passage, see Jean Fagan Yellin, *The In-tricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1972), p. 179.

well as his ever-shortening path to literacy and freedom.¹⁴ He admitted that he could see no spot on this side of the ocean where he could be free. At every gate, he saw a watchman; at every ferry, a guard; and on every bridge, a sentinel (p. 92).

Even though Douglass and his friends feared contending with the waves and being drowned, they decided to escape by water in a canoe. They planned to paddle directly up the Chesapeake Bay some seventy or eighty miles, turn the canoe adrift, and follow the North Star beyond Maryland. Disguised as fisherman and armed with holiday passes, they expected to reach the North within a few days (p. 93).

All of Douglass' plans were aborted when Mr. Hamilton and three constables arrived at Mr. Freeland's and revealed the intended escape. Deprived of his freedom, Douglass was taken to jail. Almost miraculously and for reasons not explained, he was released and sent back to Baltimore again to live with Hugh Auld.

Fortunately for Douglass, Auld hired him to Mr. William Gardner, an extensive shipbuilder at Fell's Point, and then to Mr. Walter Price. He was immediately set to calking at Price's and, in the course of one year, was able to command the highest wages. However, old notions about freedom stole over him. As his condition improved, he once again thought about being free. He knew that Auld deserved none of his hard-earned wages and likened him to a pirate on the high seas. He therefore resolved to do something quickly (pp. 103-04).

Douglass writes, "I was ever on the look-out for means of escape" (p. 107). Hiring his own time from May to early August, he saved a little money and planned to escape on September 3, 1838. This date being three weeks away, he decided to hire himself out to Mr. Butler at his shipyard near the drawbridge. This shipyard, the fourth one which Douglass mentions, is significant because it symbolizes his

¹⁴ Stepto, pp. 185-86.

impending escape. Located near a bridge that opens to the outside world, the yard symbolized freedom. Unlike the bridge mentioned earlier, no sentinel patrols were here (p. 109).

Douglass fittingly escaped from slavery disguised as a sailor. Outfitted in red shirt, tarpaulin hat, and a black cravat tied in sailor fashion, he carried a protection (identification papers) borrowed from a friend. He boarded a train in Baltimore and had a friend, a hackman, bring his baggage to the station just when the train was about to leave. In choosing this plan, Douglass avoided the ticket agent. His disguise as a sailor required him to rely on his knowledge of ships and sailors' talk and the prevailing sentiment in the country of "free trade and sailors' rights" (*LT*, pp. 198-99).¹⁵ Within twenty-four hours, Douglass arrived in New York and thus completely fused his quest for freedom, personal identity, and self-expression with the images of ships, ship-building, and sailing across the water.

Douglass did not stay in New York but went on to Newport and New Bedford. In the latter port, on the afternoon of his arrival, he visited the wharves to take a view of the shipping and found himself surrounded with the strongest proofs of wealth. Lying at the wharves and riding in the stream were ships of the largest size and huge granite warehouses housed great quantities of goods. The amount of wealth, comfort, taste, and refinement were almost too much for him to comprehend (pp. 115-16).

Mr. Nathan Johnson became Douglass' guardian in New Bedford, of whom Douglass says, "I was hungry, and he gave me meat; I was thirsty, and he gave me drink" (p. 116). A young man in New Bedford introduced him to the *Liberator*, which, Douglass says, became his meat and drink (p. 117). Unlike his grandmother, who groped in the darkness for a drink of water, Douglass had all the

¹⁵ Also, see Charles W. Chesnutt, *Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Co., 1980), p. 35.

water—natural and symbolic—that he needed.

It is entirely appropriate that the final act by which selfhood is confirmed takes place on the island of Nantucket.¹⁶ It is there that Douglass felt strongly moved to speak. The experience was cathartic and allowed him to connect and define all stages in his personal history. The following of such thematic designs through one's life, writes Vladimir Nabokov, should be the true purpose of autobiography.¹⁷

Douglass' *Narrative*, then, is tied together by the images of water. Boats, shipyards, bays, rivers, the ocean, and even creeks and tears unify the work. Major turning points take place on or near water or at places associated with water. Douglass' deepest impulses for freedom and personal identity are brought together in it, through it, and by it.

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¹⁶ Stone, p. 207.

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam's, 1966), p. 27.