CHAPTER FOUR

Frederick Douglass, Arthur O’Connor, and the *Columbian Orator*

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On 4 May 1795, Arthur O’Connor (1763–1852), the young Irish MP for the borough of Philipstown, Kingscounty (now Co. Offaly), delivered a significant speech to the House of Commons of Ireland, then sitting in Dublin, on the Catholic Question. Immediate Emancipation and equality for Irish Catholics was the subject of O’Connor’s speech, which, from the date of its delivery, has traced an interesting trajectory. Immediately after its first utterance, the speech was published as a pamphlet, *Speech of Arthur O’Connor, Esq in the House of Commons of Ireland, Monday, May 4, 1795 on the Catholic Bill*, and distributed widely. In 1797, Caleb Bingham included it in the school primer, the *Columbian Orator*, as an educational tool for young Americans, transforming the speech into a transatlantic text.

Frederick Douglass (1818–95), the young slave child, read the *Orator* and was consoled by O’Connor’s words, even though, by the very act of reading, Douglass was guilty of a criminal offence. Consequently, from the moment of its delivery in the Irish Parliament, O’Connor’s speech has been used in powerful ways, evoking radical responses that have shaped both Irish and African-American history. Yet the speech and its young speaker, Arthur O’Connor, have barely entered contemporary accounts of modern Irish history, and have been similarly neglected in both Douglass and transatlantic studies. This chapter takes an overview of O’Connor’s speech as an extract in the American school primer, the *Columbian Orator*, and considers its importance to two key actors
on the Irish and African-American historical stages: Arthur O’Connor himself; and Frederick Douglass.

Arthur O’Connor’s speech was a favourite of the young Douglass, who identifies as its key attribute “a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man.” The myopic view formed heretofore of the connection between the two men was confined to the consolation Douglass took from O’Connor’s text. This narrow perspective has detracted from consideration of Arthur O’Connor’s voice of resistance and liberation, called upon by Bingham and his contemporaries as they considered selections for the *Columbian Orator* that best served the motto of the young republic, *E Pluribus Unum*. Likewise, scholarship has not considered how Douglass, from the marginalized position of African-American slavery, participated in another transnational transfer of ideals and language. O’Connor’s revolutionary thought chimed with the revolutionary ideals espoused by Douglass and the abolitionists.

While a close reading of the oratorical structure of the speech demonstrates the importance of O’Connor’s forgotten legacy, this speech also operates as an important cultural artefact, which transcends spatial and temporal boundaries. This speech enables such connections because it was born of and resonated with the clash of different cultures – Irish Ascendancy and Irish Catholic, on the one hand, and white American and African American, on the other: cultures that contested those confined spaces prescribed by legal prerogatives. More specifically, in this text, O’Connor held the tension between the status quo that preserved the Protestant Ascendancy and the controversial emancipation of Irish Catholics in a dialectical engagement, looking beyond the terms of the argument in order to justify radical action: the emancipation of Catholics. He looked to the wider world and used global or, indeed, transatlantic examples to illustrate his points. The young Douglass could transpose these arguments to the American South: Southern aristocracy may enslave African Americans, but perhaps they could participate in a dialectical process and reach new ground on another matter of emancipation: that of slaves. Therefore, in mapping the spatial, temporal, and ideological trajectories of this speech and its different contexts, we witness the effective power of transatlantic networks in the

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