
"Mr. Editor, If You Please": Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, and the End of the Abolitionist Imprint

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"MR. EDITOR, IF YOU PLEASE"
Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*,
and the End of the Abolitionist Imprint

by John Sekora

I

Everyone familiar with antebellum America knows how closely Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison were associated in the 1840s: how they worked together, traveled together, shared lecture platforms, wrote often to and about one another. Given such closeness, it is arresting to realize that, as often as not, Garrison misspelled Douglass's name—leaving off the second "s". As revealed by the Merrill edition of Garrison's correspondence, this was no simple lapse. For when he wrote to Douglass, Garrison usually got it right. When he wrote to others, he usually did not. Three times, moreover, Garrison introduced Douglass as the man with the unusual name; once he called him the man who took his name out of Walter Scott. Like many of his followers who were inspired by religious revival, Garrison could be suspicious of novelty, eccentricity, idiosyncrasy. It does not strain the imagination to see in his misspellings a passive resistance to what he considered as his protege's affectation. He wouldn't say so, but he would act as though he did.

In retrospect we might see such lapses as inevitable, tiny portents of the friction that existed even among friends. For it was a time of extraordinary tension, perhaps the most extraordinary the nation has seen. More than a dozen times between 1840 and 1860 officers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society were charged with serious political crime: riot, treason, sedition, or rebellion. During the 1850s, according to Samuel May, if the abolition leaders left Boston, they were in danger of being injured. If they left Massachusetts, they were in danger of being killed. In the critical years 1849-54, when the Fugitive Slave Law was being enacted, when the slave states were framing a massive effort to extend slavery to the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico—during these years at least four members of Garrison's circle suffered breakdowns, and the sage himself was twice seriously ill. When he learned of one of Garrison's illnesses, Jefferson Davis expressed satisfaction.

Garrison and the other white abolitionists around Douglass did indeed have much to be anxious about. During the first seventy-two years of the Republic, a slaveholding resident of one of the states that joined the Confederacy had been President for forty-nine years—more than two-thirds of the time. In Congress, twenty-three of the thirty-six speakers of the House and twenty-four of the presidents pro tem of the Senate had been southerners. The Supreme Court always had a southern majority; twenty of

thirty-five justices to 1861 came from slave states. From 1840 to 1860 the great majority of the ten most powerful committee chairmen in the Senate were normally not only southerners but also slaveholders (McPherson 859-60).

They used that formidable power for ends the abolitionists abhorred. Initially they sought to bring back the African slave trade. When that proved too preposterous, they turned their attention to all the lands west and south. Missouri and Arkansas would do well. Texas might be turned into five distinct slave states. New Mexico, California, and Oregon would prove powerful new allies; Kansas and Nebraska would ensure a perpetual slaveholding majority among the states. Even so, the great prizes lay in Latin and South America. Mexico could be bought or stolen or conquered into eight new slave states. Freebooters were already at work invading Cuba, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. With these as staging areas, all of South America lay ahead, fruit ripe for the picking. "I want Cuba, and I know that sooner or later we must have it," said the other senator from Mississippi, Albert Gallatin Brown. Yet he had just begun. "I want Tamaulipas, Patosi, and one or two other Mexican States; and I want them all for the same reason—for the planting and spreading of slavery." The *Southern Standard* concurred: "With Cuba and St. Domingo, we could control the productions of the tropics, and with them, the commerce of the world." The leading political journal said, "We have a destiny to perform, a Manifest Destiny, over the West Indies, over South America" (106).

Each of these battles—and one hundred more—was fought in Congress, in print, and in the pulpits. In them all, the *Liberator* and her sister journals fought steadfastly—and exhaustingly. Indeed it is probably part of the secret history of the abolition movement that Garrison and his circle spent themselves—often and pointlessly. It was as though they gave so much energy and tolerance to their enemies, they had none left for their friends.

II

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave of 1845 has often and justly been acclaimed as one of the most important books ever published in America. It has been called the single most significant slave narrative and the fount from which modern black prose has flowed—from Chesnut's stories to Morrison's *Beloved*. Nevertheless, within a short time after its publication, Douglass became dissatisfied with this, his first book. And not long thereafter he came to qualify, if not repudiate, the experience that went into its composition. In a passage of arresting compression in his second narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), he describes a personal dilemma. At lectures, "I was generally introduced as a "chattel"—a "thing"—a piece of southern "property"—the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak" (orig. ed. 360). He then notes the discomfort caused by his abolitionist sponsors:

"Let us have the facts," said the people. So also said Friend George Foster, who always wished to pin me down to my simple

narrative. "Give us the facts," said Collins, "we will take care of the philosophy." Just here arose some embarrassment. It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story month after month, and to keep up my interest in it. It was new to the people, it is true, but it was an old story to me; and to go through with it night after night, was a task altogether too mechanical for my nature. "Tell your story, Frederick," would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them. I could not always curb my moral indignation for the perpetrators of slaveholding villainy, long enough for a circumstantial statement of the facts which I felt almost everybody must know. Besides, I was growing, and needed room. "People won't believe you ever was a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way," said Friend Foster. "Be yourself," said Collins, "and tell your story." It was said to me, "Better have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned." (361-62)

The distant occasion of this recollection is his experience as agent and lecturer. Blended with it is the later, more immediate memory of his trials as author and international representative of American anti-slavery societies. These are two sides of one coin. They can tell us part of the story of how he grew as a writer, how he reacted against the Garrison wing of the movement, and why the second of his narratives is a true, full autobiography while the first is not.

Douglass's dealings with Garrison and other abolitionists make one of the most compelling of American literary tales. A brilliant, self-educated young former slave goes to school to the most eloquent abolitionist of the age. Douglass takes Garrison's writings as his lesson; Garrison takes Douglass's life, his being, as *his* text. Douglass's vivid version of the initial event: "Mr. Garrison followed me, taking me as his text.... It was an effort of unequalled power....For a moment, he possessed that almost fabulous inspiration...in which a public meeting is transformed, as it were, into a single individuality—the orator wielding a thousand heads and hearts at once, and by the simple majesty of his all controlling thought, converting his hearers into the express image of his own soul" (358). They continue to inspire one another. A close, familial bond, born in political battle, grows between them. The student becomes a central participant in a mass social movement, quickly outstripping in stature the teacher himself. Quarrels follow—and spread along predictable lines—over will, money, status, activity, control. The break and ensuing bitterness shadow their remaining years and touch later political figures. It can be taken as one of the central plots of our social history, anticipating tales by Hawthorne, James, Fitzgerald, Malamud, John A. Williams, and others, as well as some of the current woes of the Democratic Party. And it contains as much irony as pathos.

To this story of men of different ages, colors, temperaments, and expectations, add the enveloping tension of the age. For the Garrisonians often felt a class if not a racial irritation against many of the former slaves with whom they worked in the abolition-

ist cause. They preferred well-turned, well-tailored gentlemen. Their rhetoric, however, required something else. Douglass could not simply talk from his direct experience of slavery. No, for the Massachusetts society excoriated slaveholders for having turned their slaves into brutes and, as if converted by their own metaphor, demanded that Douglass stand as a redeemed animal. "It is recorded in holy writ that a beast once spoke," Garrison said often, in what would prove his mission statement for black anti-slavery agents. Daily growing more confident, more accomplished, more sensitive, Douglass would for the sake of the movement portray that beast, over and over again the creature made human, the chattel turned person. Such was the christological weight he bore (in William McFeely's apt phrase) that he would everafter be "of the cabins" but clear and moving, unlearned but eloquent, a beast but noble, an animal but a gentleman: "For the whole of his life, Douglass would have to appear as a man more admirable than other men" (McFeely 91).¹

Like black soldiers during the war, black anti-slavery agents did not receive as much pay as white, and Douglass was rebuffed when he asked Maria Weston Chapman, who as secretary handled finances, for equality of salary or conditions. White speakers generally rode to the lectures; Douglass walked. White speakers carried the money from sales and contributions; Douglass could not. White speakers would introduce themselves; Douglass could not. (This is understandable the first or first few times. But the sixth? the tenth? the twentieth?) White speakers would themselves determine the content of their addresses; Douglass could not. White speakers had arrangements made for their lodging; Douglass made his own. Indeed Chapman sometimes failed to pay him at all, because he would then be forced into a position she approved, namely pleading with her for charity. On this and other issues concerning black lecturers, she believed she was applying the lessons of the British anti-slavery societies, with whom she was in close contact. *They* kept black spokesmen on a very short leash; *they* were successful in the abolitionist cause; *they* should set the example for Americans.² As policy Chapman ordained that black agents not have money to carry, preferring to send salaries home to their wives and to arrange always for a white agent to hold the funds for a journey.

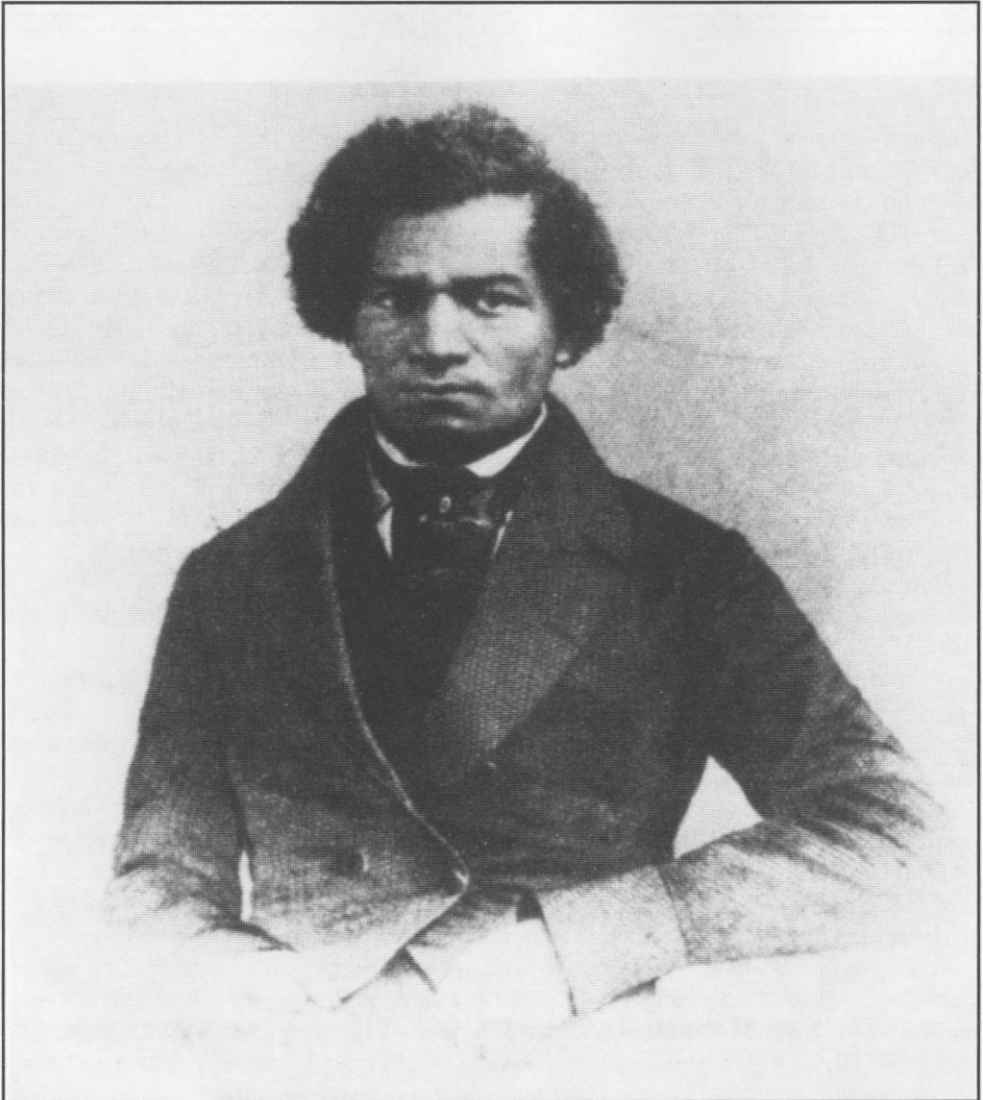
The effect of being lionized, Chapman said, was to turn Douglass into an untamed lion. More overtly than Garrison, she sought to break him. She admonished him to give up his "indecorous" attitudes, his quest for equality within the society, and his application to be made general agent, the *primus inter pares* of all positions. During his celebrated first visit to England, she had him watched in every town by British correspondents and by a white traveling companion sent specifically to control him. One of the correspondents wrote to her, agreeing, "He is a child—a savage." Another said, "...he is a wild animal."

When provoked, Douglass could be quite difficult, but this was too much. His resolve to determine his own course was strengthened when he met the Jennings, a family in Cork who accorded him the genuine equality he had hungered for in the States and provided that special brand of social comfort he would champion the rest of his life. He would hereafter refuse to play man Friday, if the only reason for deference was the assumed superiority of white people. He came to believe that slavery had corrupted abolitionists and slaveholders alike. "All great reforms go

together," was his response to a galling exchange during one meeting. His opponents were willing to work for an end to slavery but not a beginning to equality. He would no longer be a black dummy manipulated by white ventriloquists.

From the mid-1840s on, bad treatment and bad faith haunted Douglass. Abolitionists in general, even those who supported John Brown, did not wish a "servile rebellion." The Garrisonians worked for a pacific end to slavery, one that would be negotiated between themselves and the federal government. It would be, that is, one in which slaves, former slaves, and free blacks would play no part whatsoever. John Brown's plan for a free black state in the Appalachians presented a painful instance of this attitude. The conception, financing, and strategy were entirely in the hands of white New Englanders. Not a single black person was taken into trust or even consideration. Douglass had a long meeting with Brown, who was not so exclusive as the Easterners, and knew that something major impended, but did not know precisely what or when or where. Not H.H. Garnet, J.W. Loguen, Charles L. Remond, or Harriet Tubman. In something so serious as an insurrection, something that would touch so many black lives, black people were to them of no consequence. This situation could be interpreted positively, as an attempt, should the plan fail, to shield Douglass and the others from painful repercussion. But no such protection followed Brown's capture. When the authorities hunted Douglass, no one prevented or disabused them. When Douglass sought refuge first in Canada, then in Britain, Samuel May, Jr., wrote to an Irish abolitionist to avoid assisting him: "He is wholly selfish and unworthy of our trust for a moment" (McFeely 202). This is the same Samuel May who said that black abolitionists had no life apart from the movement, that it was their entire reason for being, and that they should be humbly grateful for all it had given them. Like an old toad that goes on living though buried under a rock, racial blindness persisted, even among the most inveterate of the white anti-slavery workers.

Graceless when Douglass was in adversity, the abolitionists could be obtuse when he prospered. All who worked with him testified to the propitious effect of Julia Griffiths, a white woman who traveled to America from Newcastle upon Tyne. To him she seemed an indispensable collaborator—confidante, writer, editor, business manager; he said she made his literary efforts far better, even possible. Yet by 1855, after six years of incessant abuse, Griffiths packed her bags and returned to England. The American Anti-Slavery Society did not normally permit women to share the lecture platform—or seats in the audience—with men. This is one of several reasons we have so few separately-published narratives by women. For most of the anti-slavery societies, a fugitive needed to become a well-known lecturer before being encouraged to write. If women could not easily mount the lecture platform, they could not easily take up the pen. Like other papers, *The Liberator* had a separate "Ladies' Department." To such "friends" propriety overbalanced any benefit Griffiths brought to the cause. She had to go.



III

Not yet 30, Douglass hoped to put aside such affronts and begin an independent literary career when he started the *North Star* in December of 1847. Editing his own newspaper satisfied him more than anything of recent years. It fulfilled the dreams he had formed in Britain. It made him his own publisher—thus able to skirt truculent abolitionists—and gave him the prestigious calling of journalist. It permitted him to follow in the footsteps of his mentor, Garrison, and raised him from the rank of employee, much beholden to others, to that of gentleman with a profession. It relieved him of the exhausting chore of almost daily lecturing, away from his family for weeks at a time. And it removed him from those who wished to dictate or otherwise control

his words. To be an editor meant for him not only the ability to select his own words, but also to determine their final form and disposition. For his black colleagues, Douglass's decision amounted to a new stage in the struggle for civil rights. James McCune Smith wrote of the *North Star*: "Only since his Editorial career has [Douglass] seen to become a colored man! I have read his paper very carefully and find phase after phase develop itself as in one newly born among us." For many years hereafter, when asked how he wished to be addressed, he replied proudly, "Mr. Editor, if you please" (150).

To apprehend the changes he wrought during the 1850s, recall the physical presentation of the *Narrative* in 1845. It is a slender volume, essentially a long essay, divided into eleven short chapters and an appendix. It is plainly presented—in keeping with the frugality of the Massachusetts group—without portrait, frontispiece, table of contents, chapter headings, poems, or ornament. The only elaborate portion of the book is the two contributions by white abolitionists—a Preface by Garrison and an introductory Letter by Wendell Phillips. It was printed and published by Garrison's organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society; the copyright page records that it was printed "at the Anti-Slavery Office" in Boston. Usually listed as editor and publisher of the Society's books and periodicals, Garrison provides a typographically varied, psychologically complex essay. His purpose, in Robert Stepto's acute phrase, is to make Douglass a small part of *his* story. In retrospect it seems that Douglass reacted not only against his treatment at the hands of the abolitionists, but also against the ways they muffled his literary voice.

For *My Bondage and My Freedom* ten years later, seven years after the break, seven years of dealing with all aspects of editing and publishing, is a different kind of book. And the difference is clear even before the titlepage—in the portrait that faces it. Here is the famous lithograph and signature of Douglass in his mid-thirties. He had thought that a portrait would refute his detractors ten years earlier, those who said he either did not exist or had not been a slave. But the Society chose to forgo the opportunity. When he traveled to Britain, carrying with him the plates of the *Narrative*, he insisted upon a tipped-in portrait; it would establish his identity and was moreover common practice with white American authors. His British publisher, however, absolutely refused—partly because he was under orders from Boston, partly because he found Douglass too haughty, too full of himself, and partly because he feared increased costs. But in 1855 a portrait opens the new narrative, signaling that Mr. Editor Douglass has taken full control, thank you very much—of presentation as well as text.

The contrasts are large and many, running from the opening page to the last. I shall indicate only a few. On the titlepage, he underscores that he is no longer writing an anti-slavery plea. Instead, his title gives even more prominence to the words "My Freedom," suggesting his wish to include the thinker, writer, traveler, and go beyond the simple bondsman. His story will not be introduced by any white abolitionists this time, but by Dr. James McCune Smith, a friend and prominent black activist. The distance between Garrison and Smith represents as thoroughgoing a revision as one can imagine in a decade and a movement. Using the taboo phrase "human equality," Smith twice on the opening page argues that the cause is not simply an end to bondage: "The real object of that movement is not only to disenthral, it is, also, to bestow upon the negro the exercise of all those rights, from the possession of which

MY BONDAGE
AND
MY FREEDOM.

Part I.—Life as a Slave. Part II.—Life as a Freeman.

BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS.

WITH

AN INTRODUCTION.

BY DR. JAMES M'CUNE SMITH.

By a principle essential to christianity, a PERSON is eternally differenced from a THING; so that the idea of a HUMAN BEING, necessarily excludes the idea of PROPERTY IN THAT BEING. COLERIDGE.

NEW YORK AND AUBURN:
MILLER, ORTON & MULLIGAN.

New York: 25 Park Row.—Auburn: 107 Genesee-st.

1855.

he has been so long debarred" (xvii). Within this struggle he interprets Douglass's altercations with the Garrisonians:

...these gentlemen, although proud of Frederick Douglass, failed to fathom, and bring out to the light of day, the highest qualities of his mind; the force of their own education stood in their own way: They did not delve into the mind of a colored man for the capacities which the pride of race led them to believe to be restricted to their own Saxon blood. (xxii)

"...their own...their own...their own," Smith repeats for emphasis. "From the pupilage of Garrisonism," he notes that Douglass became a national leader in his own right: "he rose to the dignity of a teacher and a thinker..." (xxiii). With acuteness, Smith conjoins in one sentence the two great battles of Douglass's life, the one during slavery, the other during freedom: "...the same strong self-hood, which led him to measure strength with Mr. Covey, and to wrench himself from the embrace of the Garrisonians...has borne him through many resistances to the personal indignities offered him as a colored man..." (xxxi).

The greatest distinction between the two introductions appears in their respective modes of address. In 1845 Garrison is utilitarian, talking mostly about slavery and Douglass's value to the cause. In 1855 Smith is aesthetic, talking mostly about style. Where the former wanted Douglass for his "irresistible mimicry" and "pathetic narrative," the latter commends the "strength, affluence, and terseness" of his mind and writing (xxix). Surpassing the effects of Henry Bibb, Hugh Miller, and the younger Pitt, Douglass is for Smith the "Representative American man—a type of his countrymen" because he has passed through every stage of American civilization in a single lifetime (xxv-xxvi). Where Garrison was pleased to present a noble beast, Smith is proud to be associated with a noble man:

...I feel joy in introducing to you my brother, who has rent his own bonds, and who, in his every relation—as a public man, as a husband and as a father—is such as does honor to the land which gave him birth. I shall place this book in the hands of the only child spared me, bidding him to strive and emulate its noble example. You may do likewise. (xxxi)

And in reflected comment on the style he admires, Smith says, "Our editors rule the land, and he is one of them" (xxv).

The titlepage is relatively elaborate in type face and type size. Yet even more so is the dedication page, perhaps to the point of extravagance.

To honor Gerrit Smith, a vocal opponent of Garrison, Douglass uses ten type fonts—four of them decorative "open-faced" types—and seven type sizes. Because more than two decorative types are seldom used on the same page during the period, this is an almost spectacular sign of editorial control.

TO
HONORABLE GERRIT SMITH,
AS A SLIGHT TOKEN OF
ESTEEM FOR HIS CHARACTER,
ADMIRATION FOR HIS GENIUS AND BENEVOLENCE,
AFFECTION FOR HIS PERSON, AND
GRATITUDE FOR HIS FRIENDSHIP,
AND AS
A Small but most Sincere Acknowledgment of
HIS PRE-EMINENT SERVICES IN BEHALF OF THE RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
OF AN
AFFLICTED, DESPISED AND DEEPLY OUTRAGED PEOPLE,
BY RANKING SLAVERY WITH PIRACY AND MURDER,
AND BY
DENYING IT EITHER A LEGAL OR CONSTITUTIONAL EXISTENCE,
This Volume is Respectfully Dedicated,
BY HIS FAITHFUL AND FIRMLY ATTACHED FRIEND,
FREDERICK DOUGLASS.
ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Next comes a full Table of Contents, with several sub-headings as well as separate titles for each chapter. With a new chapter the sub-headings are all repeated. The last of these large elements is the frontispiece. And here again Douglass surprises. For he includes not one but two—one for the section on bondage, a different one for freedom. He certainly selected these scenes, he probably commissioned them as original illustrations, and he may have helped design them. Where the first narrative carried a single appendix, *My Bondage* has eight.

LIFE AS A SLAVE.

CHAPTER I.

THE AUTHORS CHILDHOOD.

PLACE OF BIRTH—CHARACTER OF THE DISTRICT—TUCKAHOE—ORIGIN OF THE NAME—CHOPTANK RIVER—TIME OF BIRTH—GENEALOGICAL TREES—MODE OF COUNTING TIME—NAMES OF GRANDPARENTS—THEIR POSITION—GRAND-MOTHER ESPECIALLY ESTEEMED—"BORN TO GOOD LUCK"—SWEET POTATOS—SUPERSTITION—THE LOG CABIN—ITS CHAINS—SEPARATING CHILDREN—AUTHOR'S AUNTS—THEIR NAMES—FIRST KNOWLEDGE OF BEING A SLAVE—"OLD MASTER"—GRIEFS AND JOYS OF CHILDHOOD—COMPARATIVE HAPPINESS OF THE SLAVE-BOY AND THE SON OF A SLAVEHOLDER.

In Talbot county, Eastern Shore, Maryland, near Easton, the county town of that county, there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever.

The name of this singularly unpromising and truly famine stricken district is Tuckahoe, a name well known to all Marylanders, black and white. It was given to this section of country probably, at the first, merely in derision; or it may possibly have been

LIFE AS A FREEMAN.

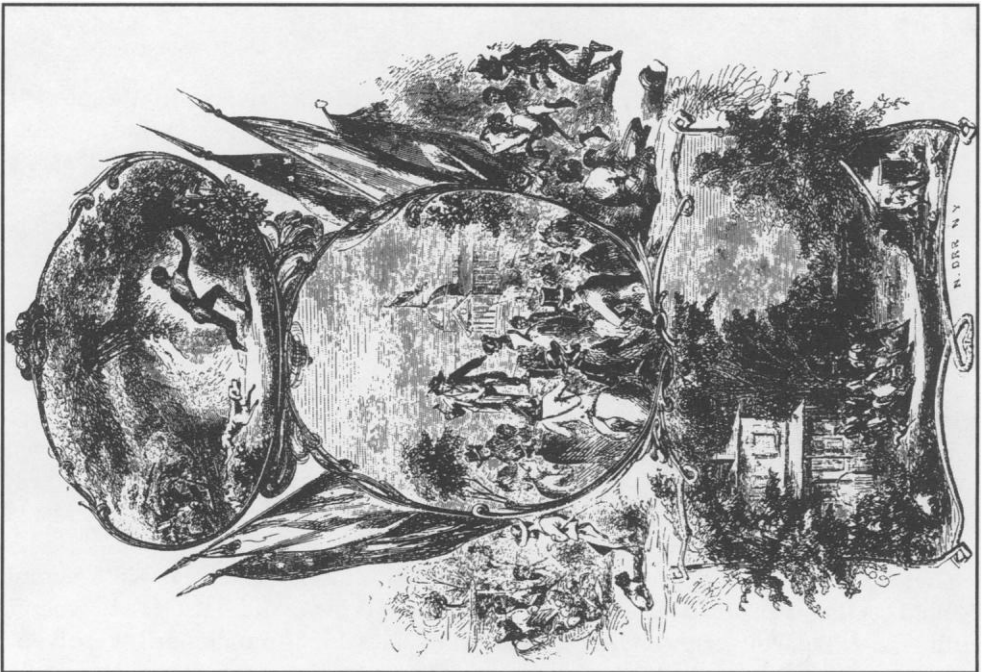
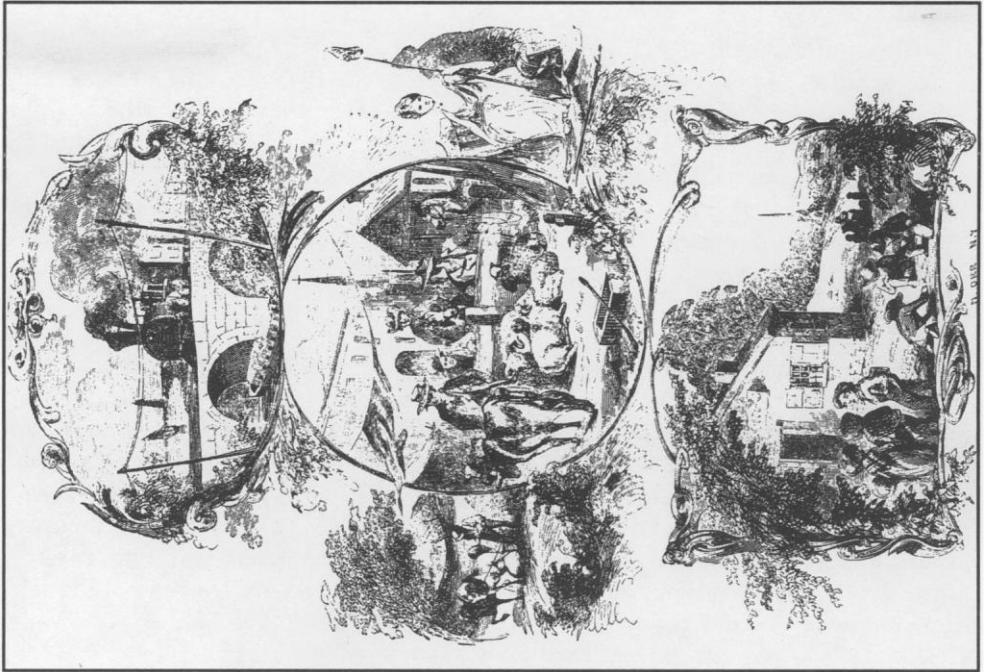
CHAPTER XXII.

LIBERTY ATTAINED.

TRANSITION FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM—A WANDERER IN NEW YORK—FEELINGS ON REACHING THAT CITY—AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE MET—UNFAVORABLE IMPRESSIONS—LONELINESS AND INSECURITY—APOLOGY FOR SLAVES WHO RETURN TO THEIR MASTERS—COMPELLED TO TELL MY OPINION—SCORDED BY A SAILOR—DAVID RUGGLES—THE UNDER-GROUND RAILROAD—MARRIAGE—BAGGAGE TAKEN FROM ME—KINDNESS OF NATHAN JOHNSON—THE AUTHOR'S CHANGE OF NAME—DARK NOTIONS OF NORTHERN CIVILIZATION—THE CONTRAST—COLORED PEOPLE IN NEW BEDFORD—AN INCIDENT ILLUSTRATING THEIR SPIRIT—THE AUTHOR AS A COMMON LABORER—DENIED WORK AT HIS TRADE—THE FIRST WINTER AT THE NORTH—REPULSE AT THE DOORS OF THE CHURCH—SANCTIFIED HATE—THE LIBERATOR AND ITS EDITOR.

There is no necessity for any extended notice of the incidents of this part of my life. There is nothing very striking or peculiar about my career as a freeman, when viewed apart from my life as a slave. The relation subsisting between my early experience and that which I am now about to narrate, is, perhaps, my best apology for adding another chapter to this book.

Disappearing from the kind reader, in a flying cloud or balloon, (pardon the figure,) driven by the



With the text itself, as one would expect, Douglass engages in an extraordinary range of editorial gestures, none present earlier. In the 1845 *Narrative* he uses italics a dozen times for emphasis. In 1855 the number is several hundred. In the *Narrative* he includes no jokes, no colloquialisms, no small capitals, no foreign terms, and few quotations. And he seldom used learned words, like *pestiferous* or *brutification*. Now these appear almost every page. He uses small caps to highlight names; italics and quotation marks to reveal subtleties of language; and dialectical phrases on one hand, French phrases on the other, to express his command of all aspects of his story. (For a quick illustration of most of these, see Chapter XVII.)

This is the shortest of short lists, yet it makes the point. The *Narrative*, for all its greatness, is not a genuine autobiography. For its original form was shaped as much by the American Anti-Slavery Society as by its author. It was moreover not so much a life story as an indictment, an anti-slavery document, the testimony of an eyewitness, precisely what Garrison sought. The true autobiography of *My Bondage and My Freedom* marks a new stage in Douglass's life and prose style. William L. Andrews has written eloquently of the new conclusion of 1855, a resolution that has Douglass joining black reformers and black organizations to carry out his plans. I have tried to argue that he assumes typographical and editorial control over his story at the same time that he redirects it politically.

IV

In an earlier essay I attempted to argue that slave narrators sought a means to deliver their message even while enclosed within an institutional white envelope. Douglass's achievement in *My Bondage and My Freedom* establishes that at least one author succeeded at least one time. But it also suggests a more generic success, one common to most narrators most of the time. Its origins lie in the tension between the "I" that Douglass wrote and the "we" that most readers, especially black readers, read—then and now.

A musical analogy for clarification. Traditional African music depends upon two or more drums playing against one another, at different meters, different pulses. A defining characteristic of that African American art form we call jazz is a tension between its groundbeat and its melody, a tension not found in most popular music and used in the 1930s to distinguish a band that was "hot" from one that was "sweet." While the drummer provides an underlying 4/4 meter, the piano or trumpet lead uses some other measure, say, 3/4 or 2/4, that contrasts yet harmonizes, plays against yet with. This simple technique becomes quite elaborate in larger groups and longer songs, as the various pulses approach each other, cross, and retreat—in a manner called cycling. Tension defines jazz certainly, but it is never more itself than when its pulses overlap, converge, and coalesce, when its tension is momentarily resolved.³

From at least the early 1840s readers remarked a tension between the "I" used by all narrators and the "we" of all persons held in slavery. (White ministers encouraged the associative process, stating, "Our brethren are held in the sin of slavery, but we all

suffer the slavery of sin.") The narrators knew whereof they wrote. For African autobiography emphasized the collective, saying in effect and sometimes in actuality, "I am what I am because we are what we are" (Olney 217-18). One need not search for African survivals, however, since black song in America also highlighted the community encased in a singular pronoun and did so in work and recreational song as much as in religious. When in the sugar fields thirty tenors sing in unison of, "No More Driver's Lash for Me" or "De Trouble I Seen," then that pronoun refers to someone other than Rousseau's solitary soul. When as many as one hundred voices are lifted in a field on Sunday for "I Seek a Land of Pure Delight" and "I'm Going on to Jordan" and "My Heart with Love Aflame," all current in the South before 1840, each is singing of and for and with all others. The result has tension, texture, density, the qualities that Eileen Southern has found in black songs of the period, especially Richard Allen's *Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns* (1801), which offers many instances of collective entreaty:

Oh, I wish I was there,
 To hear my Jesus's orders,
 Oh, I wish I was there,
 To wear my starry crown.

and,

Firm united let us be,
 In the bonds of charity;
 As a band of brothers join'd,
 Loving God and all mankind. (Southern 151-54)

For comparable tension and texture, one could turn to most pages of *My Bondage and My Freedom* (indeed to much of the *Narrative*), certainly to every major scene. Yet for a demonstration, perhaps the central scene will serve, for it is not only the most famous in the book but probably the single most famous in antebellum slave writing, the only scene McCune Smith previews in his introduction. When Douglass does physical battle with the slavebreaker Covey, he is establishing an identity within the earlier promise to reveal how a slave was made a man, giving a communal significance to an individual effort. In the retrospect of the freedman penning his memories, moreover, it is not merely a trial scene but the epitome of all he would face in slavery and without, against Covey and against Garrison, May, Chapman, Jefferson Davis, and all the others.

Radical individualism in its evangelical New England Protestant guise proved a highly serviceable philosophy for abolitionists after 1830. Teaching the sacred value in God's eyes of every individual soul, it made a persuasive potent political point as well as a valuable literary one. For if the naked beauty of the individual soul were laid bare in the captivity narratives and again in the tales of religious conversion, then the perpetual trials of slavery showed that virtue to a depth even Francis Bacon could not

imagine. (In an address of the early 1850s, William Wells Brown three times refers with admiration to Bacon's essay, "Of Adversity.") The captive had a past, a family, a personality from which to draw hope. The pains of the convert were often balanced or modified by sanctification. Only the slave was, in her or his pure condition, without solace, without sight of a better or alternative world. Here was the solitary soul at its most besieged, the solitary journey at its most uncharted, the source of evil at its most unequivocal, the beauty of virtue at its clearest.

Like captivity and conversion narratives, slave narratives make do without much dialogue, for they are extreme examples of the individual soul alone with its maker. Mary Rowlandson, Briton Hammon, Olaudah Equiano, Jarena Lee all voice their deepest longings not to other people, but to God, in prayer. Likewise Henry Bibb often says that words fail him. William Wells Brown alleges that words are inadequate to many of his situations. Solomon Northrop resorts to analogy. James Pennington and a dozen others quote abolitionist poetry. Harriet Jacobs asks northern mothers to fill in with their own emotions the blanks she says she perforce leaves. Douglass's writing is usually at its tautest stretch in direct address to the reader or in such celebrated apostrophes as that to the ships on the Chesapeake. To note this legacy of ineffability is to suggest how differently he conceived of the fight with Covey in his second written version.

As early as the third paragraph he signals a change of some kind by shifting to the present tense: "...now I am clear of Covey...for the present. I am in the wood...shut in with nature and nature's God, and absent from all human contrivances" (orig. ed. 234). This is precisely the milieu for the archetypal captivity scene—severe threat leads to profound reflection leads to fervent prayer leads to rapid resolution. But on this occasion it does not:

Here was a good place to pray; to pray for help for deliverance—a prayer I had often made before. But how could I pray? Covey could pray—Capt. Auld could pray—I would fain pray; but doubts (arising partly from my own neglect of the means of grace, and partly from the sham religion which everywhere prevailed, cast in my mind a doubt upon all religion, and led me to the conviction that prayers were unavailing and delusive) prevented my embracing the opportunity, as a religious one. Life, in itself, had almost become burdensome to me. (234-35)

Physical distress is commonplace in *My Bondage*; this measure of despair is not. Instead of prayer, he turns to a means of relief he did not choose in the *Narrative*. Instead of communion with God, he finds communion with others, with Sandy and his wife. Sensible and good natured, Sandy is "a genuine African"; a free woman, his wife is equally benevolent. Taking in the runaway could bring painful retribution to Sandy: "thirty-nine lashes on his bare back, if not something worse." Douglass responds by telling the couple all of his tribulations of the past two days and accepting their sympathy, a response not characteristic of Douglass in slavery, where he attempts to survive without attachments, and the beginning of a series (and chapter) of uncommon responses:

...both seemed to esteem it a privilege to succor me; for, although I was hated by Covey and by my master, I was loved by the colored people, because *they* thought I was hated for my knowledge, and persecuted because I was feared. I was the *only* slave *now* in that region who could read and write. (237)

This is a rare reference to love and a level of ratiocination he normally ascribes only to himself; here he gives the laurel to an otherwise inarticulate group, “the colored people.” The meal they take together becomes the sensory equivalent of their union, a banquet of fraternity: “The supper was soon ready, and though I have feasted since, with honorables, lord mayors and aldermen, over the sea, my supper on ash cake and cold water, with Sandy, was the meal, of all my life, most sweet to my taste, and now most vivid in my memory” (237).

Few such scenes occur in the *Narrative or My Bondage*. And there is nothing in the earlier work to match what follows: “Sandy and I went into a discussion of what was *possible* for me”—a collaborative decision that he should carry a protective root. Better than a weapon, Sandy could provide no more potent talisman and possessed an uncanny power over the young man, for “he professed to believe in a system for which I have no name” (238). A reliable older black man acting as a father, a family-like discussion and decision, a writer celebrated for naming the ineffable finding himself destitute of words: All these are unfamiliar elements in the Douglass literary personae. Much has been written on the folk and pagan and African significance of the root; yet it can also be seen as a gift to the 16-year-old Fred, who often hereafter is called Frederick by friend and foe alike—of friendship, of concern, of paternal care and love—a gesture as much as a thing, a spiritual inheritance, a bar mitzvah. It is sufficiently evocative for him to indulge in his first stage business, a modest dispute with his mentor, as he places final touches upon the scene:

It was beneath one of my intelligence to countenance such dealings with the devil, as this power implied. But, with all my learning—it was really precious little—Sandy was more than a match for me. “My book learning,” he said, “had not kept Covey off me,” (a powerful argument just then,) and he entreated me, with flashing eyes, to try this. If it did me no good, it could do me no harm, and it would cost me nothing, any way. Sandy was so earnest, and so confident of the good qualities of this weed, that, to please him, rather than from any conviction of its excellence, I was induced to take it. He had been to me the good Samaritan, and had, almost providentially, found me, and helped me when I could not help myself; how did I know but that the hand of the Lord was in it? (239)

When, a day later, Covey the snake slithers into the stable for his planned attack—and it is the snake against the cat—Douglass’s misgivings return: “Whence came the daring spirit necessary to grapple with a man who, eight-and-forty hours before, could, with his slightest word have made me tremble like a leaf in a storm, I do not

know..." (242). Yet the question serves merely to underscore the answer given by the chapter itself. In 1845 the actual battle is brief and stark, less than two pages in the original. In 1855, goaded by the Fugitive Slave Law into jettisoning his pacifism, he devotes more than five pages to it and concludes the chapter (XVII, "The Last Flogging") with a defiant remark impossible for the earlier advocate of nonviolence: "...I could never bully him to another battle" (249). While in the earlier volume Douglass contends alone with Covey, without setting, audience, or other participants, in *My Bondage* the mise-en-scene is richer, more nuanced, more communal, more directly flowing from Sandy's benevolence. Then too, for an event whose outcome has already been revealed, the tension is far more palpable, but far less dependent upon Douglass solely. The others are not simply participants, but *actors*. In 1845, a presumably white hired hand named Bill appears and is dismissed in a single sentence: "Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out." Now he is an active foil to Covey and Hughes, the hapless cousin:

By this time, Bill, the hired man, came home. He had been to Mr. Hemsley's, to spend the Sunday with his nominal wife, and was coming home on Monday morning, to go to work. Covey and I had been skirmishing from before daybreak, till now, that the sun was almost shooting his beams over the eastern woods, and we were still at it. I could not see where the matter was to terminate. He evidently was afraid to let me go, lest I should again make off to the woods; otherwise, he would probably have obtained arms from the house, to frighten me. Holding me, Covey called upon Bill for assistance. The scene here, had something comic about it. "Bill," who knew *precisely* what Covey wished him to do, affected ignorance, and pretended he did not know what to do. "What shall I do, Mr. Covey," said Bill. "Take hold of him—take hold of him!" said Covey. With a toss of his head, peculiar to Bill, he said, "indeed, Mr. Covey, I want to go to work." "*This is your work,*" said Covey; "take hold of him." Bill replied, with spirit, "My master hired me here, to work, and *not* to help you whip Frederick." It was now my turn to speak. "Bill," said I, "don't put your hands on me." To which he replied, "MY GOD! Frederick, I aint goin' to tech ye," and Bill walked off, leaving Covey and myself to settle our matters as best we might. (244-45)

Douglass calls attention to the theatrical quality of the episode, noting that Bill adds something comic to it, like the walk-ons in his favorite English novelists, Fielding and Smollett. The extraordinary addition is more tragic, however. For Caroline, a female slave absent in 1845, shifts the direction and thickens the texture of the remaining action. She receives a full paragraph that is the synecdotic epitome (another lesson from Fielding?) of the chapter and of the new spirit Douglass displays in 1855. She is Sandy's female counterpart and representative, as strong as he is wise, even more vulnerable because Covey's personal slave. As he had with Hughes and Bill, Covey demands her help:

Strangely...Caroline was in no humor to take a hand in any such sport. We were all in open rebellion, that morning. Caroline answered the command of her master to "take hold of me," precisely as Bill had answered, but in *her*, it was at greater peril so to answer; she was the slave of Covey, and he could do what he pleased with her. It was *not* so with Bill, and Bill knew it. Samuel Harris, to whom Bill belonged, did not allow his slaves to be beaten, unless they were guilty of some crime which the law would punish. But, poor Caroline, like myself, was at the mercy of the merciless Covey; nor did she escape the dire effects of her refusal. He gave her several sharp blows. (245-46)

In the space of a few hundred words, Douglass has transformed what had been a solitary victory in the *Narrative*, impossible to share with anyone, to communal triumph ten years later. (For an indication of Douglass's craftsmanship, compare a similar scene, Northrop's battle with the overseer Tibeats in *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrop* (1853). It is plausible that Northrop knew the 1845 scene and attempted to answer it with one of his own. Douglass, in his turn, surely knew the Northrop version and far surpassed it two years later.) The contestants in the former are Covey and Hughes on one side, a 16-year-old and his root on the other. Standing with Douglass in the latter are Sandy, his wife, Bill, and Caroline. A father-symbol is with him at the outset, a strong mother at close, suggesting that he possessed a family he did not earlier know he had. The root is diminished into a piece of precipitating stage property. Likewise the essential division is no longer one white male against one black.⁴ Opposing Covey are two black men, two black women, and one white man. Perhaps disingenuously, Douglass wonders aloud why he was not later scourged or killed for his resistance: "I confess, that the easy manner in which I got off, was, for a long time, a surprise to me, and I cannot, even now, fully explain the cause" (248). For readers, the explanation is not obscure: The strong lad of 16 has been joined to a stronger community of slaves; better than anyone alone, they understand how to scotch snakes. *Our* freedom has been tacitly substituted for *my* bondage. As in a palimpsest, our history has been overlaid upon my story. Douglass continues to write *I*, yet emphatically demonstrates *we*.

Creating a fruitful tension between the autobiographical act and the communal achievement, he strengthens a particular kind of American life story, distinguishable from the European, Rousseauesque variety. Rousseau's drummer, like Thoreau's, beats a different pulse from Douglass and Du Bois and Hughes and Malcolm, every bit as American as that music we call jazz. By adopting innovations in style and conception, he proved himself—as McCune Smith would argue—as much a Representative Man for the 1850s as he had been for the 1840s. Certain it is that the changes he adopted were followed in later slave narratives and abolitionist tracts, making *My Bondage and My Freedom* equally pen and inscription of the new style. To alter McCune Smith a moiety, Frederick Douglass was more than representative of his time; he was that time's very ticking.

Notes

1. I draw much of my biographical argument from McFeely's fine study, 84-96. Four earlier studies of the abolitionists have been indispensable: Merton L. Dillon, James B. Stewart, Ronald Walters, and Peter Walker.
2. For the British connection, see Betty Fladeland, R.J.M. Blackett, Clare Taylor, and Howard Temperley. For Chapman's role, see Blanche Glassman Hersh and Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease. The fullest resource for her complex and changing positions is the Weston Papers, Antislavery Collection, Boston Library.
3. For the nature of jazz and its New Orleans origins, see Collier and Blassingame.
4. For another gendered and important reading of the ethos surrounding this scene, see McDowell and Richard Yarborough.

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