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"I WAS BORN": SLAVE NARRATIVES, THEIR STATUS AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AS LITERATURE*

by James Olney

Anyone who sets about reading a single slave narrative, or even two or three slave narratives, might be forgiven the natural assumption that every such narrative will be, or ought to be, a unique production; for—so would go the unconscious argument—are not slave narratives autobiography, and is not every autobiography the unique tale, uniquely told, of a unique life? If such a reader should proceed to take up another half dozen narratives, however (and there is a great lot of them from which to choose the half dozen), a sense not of uniqueness but of overwhelming *sameness* is almost certain to be the result. And if our reader continues through two or three dozen more slave narratives, still having hardly begun to broach the whole body of material (one estimate puts the number of extant narratives at over six thousand), he is sure to come away dazed by the mere repetitiveness of it all: seldom will he discover anything new or different but only, always more and more of the same. This raises a number of difficult questions both for the student of autobiography and the student of Afro-American literature. Why should the narratives be so cumulative and so invariant, so repetitive and so much alike? Are the slave narratives classifiable under some larger grouping (are they history or literature or autobiography or polemical writing? and what relationship do these larger groupings bear to one another?); or do the narratives represent a mutant development really different in kind from any other mode of writing that might initially seem to relate to them as parent, as sibling, as cousin, or as some other formal relation? What narrative mode, what manner of story-telling, do we find in the slave narratives, and what is the place of memory both in this particular variety of narrative and in autobiography more generally? What is the relationship of the slave narratives to later narrative modes and later thematic complexes of Afro-American writing? The questions are multiple and manifold. I propose to come at them and to offer some tentative answers by first making some observations about autobiography and its special nature as a memorial, creative act; then outlining some of the common themes and nearly invariable conventions of slave narratives; and finally attempting to determine the place of the slave narrative 1) in the spec-

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trum of autobiographical writing, 2) in the history of American literature, and 3) in the making of an Afro-American literary tradition.

I have argued elsewhere that there are many different ways that we can legitimately understand the word and the act of autobiography; here, however, I want to restrict myself to a fairly conventional and common-sense understanding of autobiography. I will not attempt to define autobiography but merely to describe a certain kind of autobiographical performance—not the only kind by any means but the one that will allow us to reflect most clearly on what goes on in slave narratives. For present purposes, then, autobiography may be understood as a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life—the present—, looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being. Exercising memory, in order that he may recollect and narrate, the autobiographer is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper. Recollection, or memory, in this way a most creative faculty, goes backward so that narrative, its twin and counterpart, may go forward: memory and narration move along the same line only in reverse directions. Or as in Heraclitus, the way up and the way down, the way back and the way forward, are one and the same. When I say that memory is immensely creative I do not mean that it creates for itself events that never occurred (of course this can happen too, but that is another matter). What I mean instead is that memory creates the *significance* of events in discovering the pattern into which those events fall. And such a pattern, in the kind of autobiography where memory rules, will be a teleological one bringing us, in and through narration, and as it were by an inevitable process, to the end of all past moments which is the present. It is in the interplay of past and present, of present memory reflecting over past experience on its way to becoming present being, that events are lifted out of time to be resituated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance.

Paul Ricoeur, in a paper on "Narrative and Hermeneutics," makes the point in a slightly different way but in a way that allows us to sort out the place of time and memory both in autobiography in general and in the Afro-American slave narrative in particular. "*Poiesis*," according to Ricoeur's analysis, "both reflects and resolves the paradox of time"; and he continues: "It reflects it to the extent that the act of emplotment combines in various proportions two temporal dimensions, one chronological and the other non-chronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension. It characterizes the story as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, thanks to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events."[1] In autobiography it is memory that, in the recollecting and retelling of

events, effects "emplotment"; it is memory that, shaping the past according to the configuration of the present, is responsible for "the configurational dimension" that "construes significant wholes out of scattered events." It is for this reason that in a classic of autobiographical literature like Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, memory is not only the mode but becomes the very subject of the writing. I should imagine, however, that any reader of slave narratives is most immediately struck by the almost complete dominance of "the episodic dimension," the nearly total lack of any "configurational dimension," and the virtual absence of any reference to memory or any sense that memory does anything but make the past facts and events of slavery immediately present to the writer and his reader. (Thus one often gets, "I can see even now. . . . I can still hear. . . .," etc.) There is a very good reason for this, but its being a very good reason does not alter the consequence that the slave narrative, with a very few exceptions, tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act.

I say there is a good reason for this, and there is: The writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of "slavery *as it is*." Thus it is the writer's claim, it *must* be his claim, that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of *poiesis* (=shaping, making). To give a true picture of slavery as it it really is, he must maintain that he exercises a clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty—indeed, if it were creative it would be *eo ipso* faulty for "creative" would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for "lying." Thus the ex-slave narrator is debarred from use of a memory that would make anything of his narrative beyond or other than the purely, merely episodic, and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his venture, to the configurational dimension of narrative.

Of the kind of memory central to the act of autobiography as I described it earlier, Ernst Cassirer has written: "Symbolic memory is the process by which man not only repeats his past experience but also reconstructs this experience. Imagination becomes a necessary element of true recollection." In that word "imagination," however, lies the joker for an ex-slave who would write the narrative of his life in slavery. What we find Augustine doing in Book X of the *Confessions*—offering up a disquisition on memory that makes both memory itself and the narrative that it surrounds fully symbolic—would be inconceivable in a slave narrative. Of course ex-slaves do exercise memory in their narratives, but they never talk about it as Augustine does, as Rousseau does, as Wordsworth does, as Thoreau does, as Henry James does, as

a hundred other autobiographers (not to say novelists like Proust) do. Ex-slaves *cannot* talk about it because of the premises according to which they write, one of those premises being that there is nothing doubtful or mysterious about memory: on the contrary, it is assumed to be a clear, unfailing record of events sharp and distinct that need only be transformed into descriptive language to become the sequential narrative of a life in slavery. In the same way, the ex-slave writing his narrative cannot afford to put the present in conjunction with the past (again with very rare but significant exceptions to be mentioned later) for fear that in so doing he will appear, from the present, to be reshaping and so distorting and falsifying the past. As a result, the slave narrative is most often a non-memorial description fitted to a preformed mold, a mold with regular depressions here and equally regular prominences there—virtually obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances, and authentications—that carry over from narrative to narrative and give to them as a group the species character that we designate by the phrase "slave narrative."

What is this species character by which we may recognize a slave narrative? The most obvious distinguishing mark is that it is an extremely mixed production typically including any or all of the following: an engraved portrait or photograph of the subject of the narrative; authenticating testimonials, prefixed or postfixed;poetic epigraphs, snatches of poetry in the text, poems appended; illustrations before, in the middle of, or after the narrative itself;[2] interruptions of the narrative proper by way of declamatory addresses to the reader and passages that as to style might well come from an adventure story, a romance, or a novel of sentiment; a bewildering variety of documents—letters to and from the narrator, bills of sale, newspaper clippings, notices of slave auctions and of escaped slaves, certificates of marriage, of manumission, of birth and death, wills, extracts from legal codes—that appear before the text, in the text itself, in footnotes, and in appendices; and sermons and anti-slavery speeches and essays tacked on at the end to demonstrate post-narrative activities of the narrator. In pointing out the extremely mixed nature of slave narratives one immediately has to acknowledge how mixed and impure classic autobiographies are or can be also. The last three books of Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, are in a different mode from the rest of the volume, and Rousseau's *Confessions*, which begins as a novelistic romance and ends in a paranoid shambles, can hardly be considered modally consistent and all of a piece. Or if mention is made of the letters prefatory and appended to slave narratives, then one thinks quickly of the letters at the divide of Franklin's *Autobiography*, which have much the same extra-textual existence as letters at opposite ends of slave narratives. But all this said, we must recognize that the narrative let-

ters or the appended sermons haven't the same intention as the Franklin letters or Augustine's exegesis of Genesis; and further, more important, all the mixed, heterogeneous, hetero*generic* elements in slave narratives come to be so regular, so constant, so indispensable to the mode that they finally establish a set of conventions—a series of observances that become virtually *de riguer*—for slave narratives unto themselves.

The conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones. Such an outline would look something like this:

A. An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator.

B. A title page that includes the claim, as an integral part of the title, "Written by Himself" (or some close variant: "Written from a statement of Facts Made by Himself"; or "Written by a Friend, as Related to Him by Brother Jones"; etc.)

C. A handful of testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written either by a white abolitionist friend of the narrator (William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips) or by a white amanuensis/editor/author actually responsible for the text (John Greenleaf Whittier, David Wilson, Louis Alexis Chamerovzow), in the course of which preface the reader is told that the narrative is a "plain, unvarnished tale" and that naught "has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination"—indeed, the tale, it is claimed, understates the horrors of slavery.

D. A poetic epigraph, by preference from William Cowper.

E. The actual narrative:

1. a first sentence beginning, "I was born . . . ," then specifying a place but not a date of birth;

2. a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father;

3. description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims;

4. an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave—often "pure African"—who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped;

5. record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write;

6. description of a "Christian" slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that "Christian" slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion;

7. description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year;

8. account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South;

9. description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;

10. description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, travelling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation;

11. taking of a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man, but retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;

12. reflections on slavery.

F. An appendix or appendices composed of documentary material—bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, newspaper items—, further reflections on slavery, sermons, anti-slavery speeches, poems, appeals to the reader for funds and moral support in the battle against slavery.

About this "Master Plan for Slave Narratives" (the irony of the phrasing being neither unintentional nor insignificant) two observations should be made: First, that it not only describes rather loosely a great many lesser narratives but that it also describes quite closely the greatest of them all, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*,[3] which paradoxically transcends the slave narrative mode while being at the same time its fullest, most exact representative; Second, that what is being recounted in the narratives is nearly always the realities of the institution of slavery, almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator (here, as often, Douglass succeeds in being an exception without ceasing to be the best example: he goes beyond the single intention of describing slavery, but he also describes it more exactly and more convincingly than anyone else). The lives of the narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and for their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like. Thus in one sense the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders. This is why John Brown's story is titled *Slave Life in Georgia* and only subtitled "A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave," and it is why Charles Ball's story (which reads like historical fiction based on very extensive research) is called *Slavery in the United States*, with the somewhat extended subtitle "A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man, who lived forty years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a slave, under various masters, and was one year in the

navy with Commodore Barney, during the late war. Containing an account of the manners and usages of the planters and slaveholders of the South—a description of the condition and treatment of the slaves, with observations upon the state of morals amongst the cotton planters, and the perils and sufferings of a fugitive slave, who twice escaped from the cotton country." The central focus of these two, as of nearly all the narratives, is slavery, an institution and an external reality, rather than a particular and individual life as it is known internally and subjectively. This means that unlike autobiography in general the narratives are all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, they have behind them and guiding them an organized group of "sponsors," and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition. How, then, could the narratives be anything but very much like one another?

Several of the conventions of slave-narrative writing established by this triangular relationship of narrator, audience, and sponsors and the logic that dictates development of those conventions will bear and will reward closer scrutiny. The conventions I have in mind are both thematic and formal and they tend to turn up as often in the paraphernalia surrounding the narratives as in the narratives themselves. I have already remarked on the extra-textual letters so commonly associated with slave narratives and have suggested that they have a different logic about them from the logic that allows or impels Franklin to include similarly alien documents in his autobiography; the same is true of the signed engraved portraits or photographs so frequently to be found as frontispieces in slave narratives. The portrait and the signature (which one might well find in other nineteenth-century autobiographical documents but with different motivation), like the prefatory and appended letters, the titular tag "Written by Himself," and the standard opening "I was born," are intended to attest to the real existence of a narrator, the sense being that the status of the narrative will be continually called into doubt, so it cannot even begin, until the narrator's real existence is firmly established. Of course the argument of the slave narratives is that the events narrated are factual and truthful and that they all really happened to the narrator, but this is a second-stage argument; prior to the claim of truthfulness is the simple, existential claim: "I exist." Photographs, portraits, signatures, authenticating letters all make the same claim: "This man exists." Only then can the narrative begin. And how do most of them actually begin? They begin with the existential claim repeated. "I was born" are the first words of Moses Roper's *Narrative*, and they are likewise the first words of the narratives of Henry Bibb and Harriet Jacobs, of Henry Box Brown[4] and William

Wells Brown, of Frederick Douglass[5] and John Thompson, of Samuel Ringgold Ward and James W. C. Pennington, of Austin Steward and James Roberts, of William Green and William Grimes, of Levin Tilmon and Peter Randolph, of Louis Hughes and Lewis Clarke, of John Andrew Jackson and Thomas H. Jones, of Lewis Charlton and Noah Davis, of James Williams and William Parker and William and Ellen Craft (where the opening assertion is varied only to the extent of saying, "My wife and myself were born").[6]

We can see the necessity for this first and most basic assertion on the part of the ex-slave in the contrary situation of an autobiographer like Benjamin Franklin. While any reader was free to doubt the motives of Franklin's memoir, no one could doubt his existence, and so Franklin begins not with any claims or proofs that he was born and now really exists but with an explanation of why he has chosen to write such a document as the one in hand. With the ex-slave, however, it was his existence and his identity, not his reasons for writing, that were called into question: if the former could be established the latter would be obvious and the same from one narrative to another. Franklin cites four motives for writing his book (to satisfy descendants' curiosity; to offer an example to others; to provide himself the pleasure of reliving events in the telling; to satisfy his own vanity), and while one can find narratives by ex-slaves that might have in them something of each of these motives—James Mars, for example, displays in part the first of the motives, Douglass in part the second, Josiah Henson in part the third, and Samuel Ringgold Ward in part the fourth—the truth is that behind every slave narrative that is in any way characteristic or representative there is the one same persistent and dominant motivation, which is determined by the interplay of narrator, sponsors, and audience and which itself determines the narrative in theme, content, and form. The theme is the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it; the content is a series of events and descriptions that will make the reader see and feel the realities of slavery; and the form is a chronological, episodic narrative beginning with an assertion of existence and surrounded by various testimonial evidences for that assertion.

In the title and subtitle of John Brown's narrative cited earlier—*Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave*—we see that the theme promises to be treated on two levels, as it were titular and subtitular: the social or institutional and the personal or individual. What typically happens in the actual narratives, especially the best known and most reliable of them, is that the social theme, the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it, trifurcates on the personal level to become subthemes of literacy, identity, and freedom which, though not obviously and at first sight closely related matters, nevertheless lead into one another in such

a way that they end up being altogether interdependent and virtually indistinguishable as thematic strands. Here, as so often, Douglass' *Narrative* is at once the best example, the exceptional case, and the supreme achievement. The full title of Douglass' book is itself classic: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself.*[7] There is much more to the phrase "written by himself," of course, than the mere laconic statement of a fact: it is literally a part of the narrative, becoming an important thematic element in the retelling of the life wherein literacy, identity, and a sense of freedom are all acquired simultaneously and without the first, according to Douglass, the latter two would never have been. The dual fact of literacy and identity ("written" and "himself") reflects back on the terrible irony of the phrase in apposition, "An American Slave": How can both of these—"American" and "Slave"—be true? And this in turn carries us back to the name, "Frederick Douglass," which is written all around the narrative: in the title, on the engraved portrait, and as the last words of the text:

> Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds—faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts—and solemnly pledging myself anew to the sacred cause,—I subscribe myself,
>
> FREDERICK DOUGLASS

"I subscribe myself"—I write my self down in letters, I underwrite my identity and my very being, as indeed I have done in and all through the foregoing narrative that has brought me to this place, this moment, this state of being.

The ability to utter his name, and more significantly to utter it in the mysterious characters on a page where it will continue to sound in silence so long as readers continue to construe the characters, is what Douglass' *Narrative* is about, for in that lettered utterance is assertion of identity and in identity is freedom—freedom from slavery, freedom from ignorance, freedom from non-being, freedom even from time. When Wendell Phillips, in a standard letter prefatory to Douglass' *Narrative*, says that in the past he has always avoided knowing Douglass' "real name and birthplace" because it is "still dangerous, in Massachusetts, for honest men to tell their names," one understands well enough what he means by "your real name" and the danger of telling it—"Nobody knows my name," James Baldwin says. And yet in a very important way Phillips is profoundly wrong, for Douglass had been saying his "real name" ever since escaping from slavery in

the way in which he went about creating and asserting his identity as a free man: *Frederick Douglass*. In the *Narrative* he says his real name not when he reveals that he "was born" Frederick Bailey but when he puts his signature below his portrait before the beginning and subscribes himself again after the end of the narrative. Douglass' name-changes and self-naming are highly revealing at each stage in his progress: "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey" by the name given him by his mother, he was known as "Frederick Bailey" or simply "Fred" while growing up; he escaped from slavery under the name "Stanley," but when he reached New York took the name "Frederick Johnson." (He was married in New York under that name—and gives a copy of the marriage certificate in the text—by the Rev. J. W. C. Pennington who had himself escaped from slavery some ten years before Douglass and who would produce his own narrative some four years after Douglass.) Finally, in New Bedford, he found too many Johnsons and so gave to his host (one of the too many—Nathan Johnson) the privilege of naming him, "but told him he must not take from me the name of 'Frederick.' I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity." Thus a new social identity but a continuity of personal identity.

In narrating the events that produced both change and continuity in his life, Douglass regularly reflects back and forth (and here he is very much the exception) from the person written about to the person writing, from a narrative of past events to a present narrator grown out of those events. In one marvellously revealing passage describing the cold he suffered from as a child, Douglass says, "My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes." One might be inclined to forget that it is a vastly different person writing from the person written about, but it is a very significant and immensely effective reminder to refer to the writing instrument as a way of realizing the distance between the literate, articulate writer and the illiterate, inarticulate subject of the writing. Douglass could have said that the cold caused lesions in his feet a quarter of an inch across, but in choosing the writing instrument held at the present moment—"the pen with which I am writing"—by one now known to the world as Frederick Douglass, he dramatizes how far removed he is from the boy once called Fred (and other, worse names, of course) with cracks in his feet and with no more use for a pen than for any of the other signs and appendages of the education that he had been denied and that he would finally acquire only with the greatest difficulty but also with the greatest, most telling success, as we feel in the quality of the narrative now flowing from the literal and symbolic pen he holds in his hand. Here we have literacy, identity, and freedom, the omnipresent thematic trio of the most important slave narratives, all conveyed in a single startling image.[8]

There is, however, only one Frederick Douglass among the ex-slaves who told their stories and the story of slavery in a single narrative, and in even the best known, most highly regarded of the other narratives—those, for example, by William Wells Brown, Charles Ball, Henry Bibb, Josiah Henson, Solomon Northup, J. W. C. Pennington, and Moses Roper[9]—all the conventions are observed—conventions of content, theme, form, and style—but they remain just that: conventions untransformed and unredeemed. The first three of these conventional aspects of the narratives are, as I have already suggested, pretty clearly determined by the relationship between the narrator himself and those I have termed the sponsors (as well as the audience) of the narrative. When the abolitionists invited an ex-slave to tell his story of experience in slavery to an anti-slavery convention, and when they subsequently sponsored the appearance of that story in print,[10] they had certain clear expectations, well understood by themselves and well understood by the ex-slave too, about the proper content to be observed, the proper theme to be developed, and the proper form to be followed. Moreover, content, theme, and form discovered early on an appropriate style and that appropriate style was also the personal style displayed by the sponsoring abolitionists in the letters and introductions they provided so generously for the narratives. It is not strange, of course, that the style of an introduction and the style of a narrative should be one and the same in those cases where introduction and narrative were written by the same person—Charles Stearns writing introduction and narrative of Box Brown, for example, or David Wilson writing preface and narrative of Solomon Northup. What is strange, perhaps, and a good deal more interesting, is the instance in which the style of the abolitionist introducer carries over into a narrative that is certified as "Written by Himself," and this latter instance is not nearly so isolated as one might initially suppose. I want to look somewhat closely at three variations on stylistic interchange that I take to represent more or less adequately the spectrum of possible relationships between prefatory style and narrative style, or more generally between sponsor and narrator: Henry Box Brown, where the preface and narrative are both clearly in the manner of Charles Stearns; Solomon Northup, where the enigmatical preface and narrative, although not so clearly as in the case of Box Brown, are nevertheless both in the manner of David Wilson; and Henry Bibb, where the introduction is signed by Lucius C. Matlack and the author's preface by Henry Bibb, and where the narrative is "Written by Himself"—but where also a single style is in control of introduction, author's preface, and narrative alike.

Henry Box Brown's *Narrative*, we are told on the title-page, was

WRITTEN FROM A

STATEMENT OF FACTS MADE BY HIMSELF.

WITH REMARKS UPON THE REMEDY FOR SLAVERY.

BY CHARLES STEARNS.

Whether it is intentional or not, the order of the elements and the punctuation of this subtitle (with full stops after lines two and three) make it very unclear just what is being claimed about authorship and stylistic responsibility for the narrative. Presumably the "remarks upon the remedy for slavery" are by Charles Stearns (who was also, at 25 Cornhill, Boston, the publisher of the *Narrative*), but this title-page could well leave a reader in doubt about the party responsible for the stylistic manner of the narration. Such doubt will soon be dispelled, however, if the reader proceeds from Charles Stearns' "preface" to Box Brown's "narrative" to Charles Stearns' "remarks upon the remedy for slavery." The preface is a most poetic, most high-flown, most grandiloquent peroration that, once cranked up, carries right over into and through the narrative to issue in the appended remarks which come to an end in a REPRESENTATION OF THE BOX in which Box Brown was transported from Richmond to Philadelphia. Thus from the preface: "Not for the purpose of administering to a prurient desire to 'hear and see some new thing,' nor to gratify any inclination on the part of the hero of the following story to be honored by man, is this simple and touching narrative of the perils of a seeker after the 'boon of liberty,' introduced to the public eye . . . ," etc.—the sentence goes on three times longer than this extract, describing as it proceeds "the horrid sufferings of one as, in a *portable prison*, shut out from the light of heaven, and nearly deprived of its balmy air, he pursued his fearful journey. . . . " As is usual in such prefaces, we are addressed directly by the author: "O reader, as you peruse this heart-rending tale, let the tear of sympathy roll freely from your eyes, and let the deep fountains of human feeling, which God has implanted in the breast of every son and daughter of Adam, burst forth from their enclosure, until a stream shall flow therefrom on to the surrounding world, of so invigorating and purifying a nature, as to arouse from the 'death of the sin' of slavery, and cleanse from the pollutions thereof, all with whom you may be connected." We may not be overwhelmed by the sense of this sentence but surely we must be by its rich rhetorical manner.

The narrative itself, which is all first person and "the plain narrative of our friend," as the preface says, begins in this manner:

> I am not about to harrow the feelings of my readers by a terrific representation of the untold horrors of that fearful system of oppression, which for thirty-three long years entwined its snaky folds about my soul, as the serpent of South America coils itself around the form of its unfortunate victim. It is not my purpose to descend deeply into the dark and noisome caverns of the hell of slavery, and drag from their frightful abode those lost spirits who haunt the souls of the poor slaves, daily and nightly with their frightful presence, and with the fearful sound of their ter-

> rific instruments of torture; for other pens far abler than mine have effectually performed that portion of the labor of an exposer of the enormities of slavery.

Suffice it to say of this piece of fine writing that the pen—than which there were others far abler—was held not by Box Brown but by Charles Stearns and that it could hardly be further removed than it is from the pen held by Frederick Douglass, that pen that could have been laid in the gashes in his feet made by the cold. At one point in his narrative Box Brown is made to say (after describing how his brother was turned away from a stream with the remark "We do not allow niggers to fish"), "Nothing daunted, however, by this rebuff, my brother went to another place, and was quite successful in his undertaking, obtaining a plentiful supply of the finny tribe."[11] It may be that Box Brown's story was told from "a statement of facts made by himself," but after those facts have been dressed up in the exotic rhetorical garments provided by Charles Stearns there is precious little of Box Brown (other than the representation of the box itself) that remains in the narrative. And indeed for every fact there are pages of self-conscious, self-gratifying, self-congratulatory philosophizing by Charles Stearns, so that if there is any life here at all it is the life of that man expressed in his very own overheated and foolish prose.[12]

David Wilson is a good deal more discreet than Charles Stearns, and the relationship of preface to narrative in *Twelve Years a Slave* is therefore a great deal more questionable, but also more interesting, than in the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*. Wilson's preface is a page and a half long; Northup's narrative, with a song at the end and three or four appendices, is three hundred thirty pages long. In the preface Wilson says, "Many of the statements contained in the following pages are corroborated by abundant evidence—others rest entirely upon Solomon's assertion. That he has adhered strictly to the truth, the editor, at least, who has had an opportunity of detecting any contradiction or discrepancy in his statements, is well satisfied. He has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular. . . . "[13] Now Northup's narrative is not only a very long one but is filled with a vast amount of circumstantial detail, and hence it strains a reader's credulity somewhat to be told that he "invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular." Moreover, since the style of the narrative (as I shall argue in a moment) is demonstrably not Northup's own, we might well suspect a filling in and fleshing out on the part of—perhaps not the "onlie begetter" but at least—the actual author of the narrative. But this is not the most interesting aspect of Wilson's performance in the preface nor the one that will repay closest examination. That comes with the conclusion of the preface which reads as follows:

> It is believed that the following account of his [Northup's] experience on Bayou Boeuf presents a correct picture of Slavery, in all its lights and shadows, as it now exists in that locality. Unbiased, as he conceives, by any prepossessions or prejudices, the only object of the editor has been to give a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as he received it from his lips.
>
> In the accomplishment of that object, he trusts he has succeeded, notwithstanding the numerous faults of style and of expression it may be found to contain.

To sort out, as far as possible, what is being asserted here we would do well to start with the final sentence, which is relatively easy to understand. To acknowledge faults in a publication and to assume responsibility for them is of course a commonplace gesture in prefaces, though why the question of style and expression should be so important in giving "a faithful history" of someone's life "as . . . received . . . from his lips" is not quite clear; presumably the virtues of style and expression are superadded to the faithful history to give it whatever literary merits it may lay claim to, and insofar as these fall short the author feels the need to acknowledge responsibility and apologize. Nevertheless, putting this ambiguity aside, there is no doubt about who is responsible for what in this sentence, which, if I might replace pronouns with names, would read thus: "In the accomplishment of that object, David Wilson trusts that he [David Wilson] has succeeded, notwithstanding the numerous faults of style and of expression [for which David Wilson assumes responsibility] it may be found by the reader to contain." The two preceding sentences, however, are altogether impenetrable both in syntax and in the assertion they are presumably designed to make. Casting the first statement as a passive one ("It is believed . . . ") and dangling a participle in the second ("Unbiased . . . "), so that we cannot know in either case to whom the statement should be attached, Wilson succeeds in obscuring entirely the authority being claimed for the narrative.[14] It would take too much space to analyze the syntax, the psychology (one might, however, glance at the familiar use of Northup's given name), and the sense of these affirmations, but I would challenge anyone to diagram the second sentence ("Unbiased . . . ") with any assurance at all.

As to the narrative to which these prefatory sentences refer: When we get a sentence like this one describing Northup's going into a swamp—"My midnight intrusion had awakened the feathered tribes [near relatives of the 'finny tribe' of Box Brown/Charles Stearns], which seemed to throng the morass in hundreds of thousands, and their garrulous throats poured forth such multitudinous sounds—there was such a fluttering of wings—such sullen plunges in the water all around me—that I was affrighted and appalled" (p. 141)—when we get such a

sentence we may think it pretty fine writing and awfully literary, but the fine writer is clearly David Wilson rather than Solomon Northup. Perhaps a better instance of the white amanuensis/sentimental novelist laying his mannered style over the faithful history as received from Northup's lips is to be found in this description of a Christmas celebration where a huge meal was provided by one slaveholder for slaves from surrounding plantations: "They seat themselves at the rustic table—the males on one side, the females on the other. The two between whom there may have been an exchange of tenderness, invariably manage to sit opposite; for the omnipresent Cupid disdains not to hurl his arrows into the simple hearts of slaves" (p. 215). The entire passage should be consulted to get the full effect of Wilson's stylistic extravagances when he pulls the stops out, but any reader should be forgiven who declines to believe that this last clause, with its reference to "the simple hearts of slaves" and its self-conscious, inverted syntax ("disdains not"), was written by someone who had recently been in slavery for twelve years. "Red," we are told by Wilson's Northup, "is decidedly the favorite color among the enslaved damsels of my acquaintance. If a red ribbon does not encircle the neck, you will be certain to find all the hair of their wooly heads tied up with red strings of one sort or another" (p. 214). In the light of passages like these, David Wilson's apology for "numerous faults of style and of expression" takes on all sorts of interesting new meaning. The rustic table, the omnipresent Cupid, the simple hearts of slaves, and the woolly heads of enslaved damsels, like the finny and feathered tribes, might come from any sentimental novel of the nineteenth century—one, say, by Harriet Beecher Stowe; and so it comes as no great surprise to read on the dedication page the following: "To Harriet Beecher Stowe: Whose Name, Throughout the World, Is Identified with the Great Reform: This Narrative, Affording Another Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, Is Respectfully Dedicated." While not surprising, given the style of the narrative, this dedication does little to clarify the authority that we are asked to discover in and behind the narrative, and the dedication, like the pervasive style, calls into serious question the status of *Twelve Years a Slave* as autobiography and/or literature.[15]

For Henry Bibb's narrative Lucius C. Matlack supplied an introduction in a mighty poetic vein in which he reflects on the paradox that out of the horrors of slavery have come some beautiful narrative productions. "Gushing fountains of poetic thought, have started from beneath the rod of violence, that will long continue to slake the feverish thirst of humanity outraged, until swelling to a flood it shall rush with wasting violence over the ill-gotten heritage of the oppressor. Startling incidents authenticated, far excelling fiction in their touching pathos, from the pen of self-emancipated slaves, do now exhibit slavery in such

revolting aspects, as to secure the execrations of all good men, and become a monument more enduring than marble, in testimony strong as sacred writ against it."[16] The picture Matlack presents of an outraged humanity with a feverish thirst for gushing fountains started up by the rod of violence is a peculiar one and one that seems, psychologically speaking, not very healthy. At any rate, the narrative to which Matlack's observations have immediate reference was, as he says, from the pen of a self-emancipated slave (self-emancipated several times), and it does indeed contain startling incidents with much touching pathos about them; but the really curious thing about Bibb's narrative is that it displays much the same florid, sentimental, declamatory rhetoric as we find in ghostwritten or as-told-to narratives and also in prefaces such as those by Charles Stearns, Louis Alexis Chamerovzow, and Lucius Matlack himself. Consider the account Bibb gives of his courtship and marriage. Having determined by a hundred signs that Malinda loved him even as he loved her—"I could read it by her always giving me the preference of her company; by her pressing invitations to visit even in opposition to her mother's will. I could read it in the language of her bright and sparkling eye, penciled by the unchangable finger of nature, that spake but could not lie" (pp. 34-35)—Bibb decided to speak and so, as he says, "broached the subject of marriage":

> I said, "I never will give my heart nor hand to any girl in marriage, until I first know her sentiments upon the all-important subjects of Religion and Liberty. No matter how well I might love her, nor how great the sacrifice in carrying out these God-given principles. And I here pledge myself from this course never to be shaken while a single pulsation of my heart shall continue to throb for Liberty."

And did his "dear girl" funk the challenge thus proposed by Bibb? Far from it—if anything she proved more high-minded than Bibb himself.

> With this idea Malinda appeared to be well pleased, and with a smile she looked me in the face and said, "I have long entertained the same views, and this has been one of the greatest reasons why I have not felt inclined to enter the married state while a slave; I have always felt a desire to be free; I have long cherished a hope that I should yet be free, either by purchase or running away. In regard to the subject of Religion, I have always felt that it was a good thing, and something that I would seek for at some future period."

It is all to the good, of course, that no one has ever spoken or could ever speak as Bibb and his beloved are said to have done—no one, that is, outside a bad, sentimental novel of date c. 1849.[17] Though actually written by Bibb, the narrative, for style and tone, might as well have

been the product of the pen of Lucius Matlack. But the combination of the sentimental rhetoric of white fiction and white preface-writing with a realistic presentation of the facts of slavery, all parading under the banner of an authentic—and authenticated—personal narrative, produces something that is neither fish nor fowl. A text like Bibb's is committed to two conventional forms, the slave narrative and the novel of sentiment, and caught by both it is unable to transcend either. Nor is the reason far to seek: the sensibility that produced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was closely allied to the abolitionist sensibility that sponsored the slave narratives and largely determined the form they should take. The master-slave relationship might go underground or it might be turned inside out but it was not easily done away with.

Consider one small but recurrent and telling detail in the relationship of white sponsor to black narrator. John Brown's narrative, we are told by Louis Alexis Chamerovzow, the "Editor" (actually author) of *Slave Life in Georgia*, is "a plain, unvarnished tale of real Slave-life"; Edwin Scrantom, in his letter "recommendatory," writes to Austin Steward of his *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman*, "Let its plain, unvarnished tale be sent out, and the story of Slavery and its abominations, again be told by one who has felt in his own person its scorpion lash, and the weight of its grinding heel"; the preface writer ("W. M. S.") for *Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* calls it "the unvarnished, but ower true tale of John Andrew Jackson, the escaped Carolinian slave"; John Greenleaf Whittier, apparently the dupe of his "ex-slave," says of *The Narrative of James Williams*, "The following pages contain the simple and unvarnished story of an AMERICAN SLAVE"; Robert Hurnard tells us that he was determined to receive and transmit Solomon Bayley's *Narrative* "in his own simple, unvarnished style"; and Harriet Tubman too is given the "unvarnished" honorific by Sarah Bradford in her preface to *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*: "It is proposed in this little book to give a plain and unvarnished account of some scenes and adventures in the life of a woman who, though one of earth's lowly ones, and of dark-hued skin, has shown an amount of heroism in her character rarely possessed by those of any station in life." The fact that the varnish is laid on very thickly indeed in several of these (Brown, Jackson, and Williams, for example) is perhaps interesting, but it is not the essential point, which is to be found in the repeated use of just this word—"unvarnished"—to describe all these tales. The Oxford English Dictionary will tell us (which we should have surmised anyway) that Othello, another figure of "dark-hued skin" but vastly heroic character, first used the word "unvarnished"—"I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver/ Of my whole course of love"; and that, at least so far as the OED record goes, the word does not turn up again until Burke used it in 1780, some 175 years later ("This

is a true, unvarnished, undisguised state of the affair"). I doubt that anyone would imagine that white editors/amanuenses had an obscure passage from Burke in the back of their collective mind—or deep down in that mind—when they repeatedly used this word to characterize the narrative of their ex-slaves. No, it was certainly a Shakespearean hero they were unconsciously evoking, and not just any Shakespearean hero but always Othello, the Noble Moor.

Various narrators of documents "written by himself" apologize for their lack of grace or style or writing ability, and again various narrators say that theirs are simple, factual, realistic presentations; but no ex-slave that I have found who writes his own story calls it an "unvarnished" tale: the phrase is specific to white editors, amanuenses, writers, and authenticators. Moreover, to turn the matter around, when an ex-slave makes an allusion to Shakespeare (which is naturally a very infrequent occurrence) to suggest something about his situation or imply something of his character, the allusion is never to Othello. Frederick Douglass, for example, describing all the imagined horrors that might overtake him and his fellows should they try to escape, writes, "I say, this picture sometimes appalled us, and made us:

> 'rather bear those ills we had,
> Than fly to others, that we knew not of.'"

Thus it was in the light of Hamlet's experience and character that Douglass saw his own, not in the light of Othello's experience and character. Not so William Lloyd Garrison, however, who says in the preface to Douglass' *Narrative*, "I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination. . . . "[18] We can be sure that it is entirely unconscious, this regular allusion to Othello, but it says much about the psychological relationship of white patron to black narrator that the former should invariably see the latter not as Hamlet, not as Lear, not as Antony, or any other Shakespearean hero but always and only as Othello.

> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of them as they are. Nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
> Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well;
> Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
> Perplex'd in the extreme. . . .

The Moor, Shakespeare's or Garrison's, was noble, certainly, but he was also a creature of unreliable character and irrational passion—such, at least, seems to have been the logic of the abolitionists' attitude toward

their ex-slave speakers and narrators—and it was just as well for the white sponsor to keep him, if possible, on a pretty short leash. Thus it was that the Garrisonians—though not Garrison himself—were opposed to the idea (and let their opposition be known) that Douglass and William Wells Brown should secure themselves against the Fugitive Slave Law by purchasing their freedom from ex-masters; and because it might harm their cause the Garrisonians attempted also to prevent William Wells Brown from dissolving his marriage. The reaction from the Garrisonians and from Garrison himself when Douglass insisted on going his own way anyhow was both excessive and revealing, suggesting that for them the Moor had ceased to be noble while still, unfortunately, remaining a Moor. *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Garrison wrote, "in its second portion, is reeking with the virus of personal malignity towards Wendell Phillips, myself, and the old organizationists generally, and *full of ingratitude and baseness towards as true and disinterested friends as any man ever yet had upon earth.*"[19] That this simply is not true of *My Bondage and My Freedom* is almost of secondary interest to what the words I have italicized reveal of Garrison's attitude toward his ex-slave and the unconscious psychology of betrayed, outraged proprietorship lying behind it. And when Garrison wrote to his wife that Douglass' conduct "has been impulsive, inconsiderate and highly inconsistent" and to Samuel J. May that Douglass himself was "destitute of every principle of honor, ungrateful to the last degree and malevolent in spirit,"[20] the picture is pretty clear: for Garrison, Douglass had become Othello gone wrong, Othello with all his dark-hued skin, his impulsiveness and passion but none of his nobility of heroism.

The relationship of sponsor to narrator did not much affect Douglass' own *Narrative*: he was capable of writing his story without asking the Garrisonians' leave or requiring their guidance. But Douglass was an extraordinary man and an altogether exceptional writer, and other narratives by ex-slaves, even those entirely "Written by Himself," scarcely rise above the level of the preformed, imposed and accepted conventional. Of the narratives that Charles Nichols judges to have been written without the help of an editor—those by "Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, James W. C. Pennington, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Austin Steward and perhaps Henry Bibb"[21]—none but Douglass' has any genuine appeal in itself, apart from the testimony it might provide about slavery, or any real claim to literary merit. And when we go beyond this bare handful of narratives to consider those written under immediate abolitionist guidance and control, we find, as we might well expect, even less of individual distinction or distinctiveness as the narrators show themselves more or less content to remain slaves to a prescribed, conventional, and imposed form; or

perhaps it would be more precise to say that they were captive to the abolitionist intentions and so the question of their being content or otherwise hardly entered in. Just as the triangular relationship embracing sponsor, audience, and ex-slave made of the latter something other than an entirely free creator in the telling of his life story, so also it made of the narrative produced (always keeping the exceptional case in mind) something other than autobiography in any full sense and something other than literature in any reasonable understanding of that term as an act of creative imagination. An autobiography or a piece of imaginative literature may of course observe certain conventions, but it cannot be only, merely conventional without ceasing to be satisfactory as either autobiography or literature, and that is the case, I should say, with all the slave narratives except the great one by Frederick Douglass.

But here a most interesting paradox arises. While we may say that the slave narratives do not qualify as either autobiography or literature, and while we may argue, against John Bayliss and Gilbert Osofsky and others, that they have no real place in American Literature (just as we might argue, and on the same grounds, against Ellen Moers that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is *not* a great American novel), yet the undeniable fact is that the Afro-American literary tradition takes its start, in theme certainly but also often in content and form, from the slave narratives. Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, which many readers (myself included) would take to be his supreme achievement as a creative writer, provides the perfect case in point, though a host of others could be adduced that would be nearly as exemplary (DuBois' various autobiographical works; Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man;* Baldwin's autobiographical fiction and essays; Ellison's *Invisible Man;* Gaines' *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*; Maya Angelou's writing; etc.). In effect, Wright looks back to slave narratives at the same time that he projects developments that would occur in Afro-American writing after *Black Boy* (published in 1945). Thematically, *Black Boy* reenacts both the general, objective portrayal of the realities of slavery as an institution (transmuted to what Wright calls "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" in the little piece that lies behind *Black Boy*) and also the particular, individual complex of literacy-identity-freedom that we find at the thematic center of all of the most important slave narratives. In content and form as well *Black Boy* repeats, mutatis mutandis, much of the general plan given earlier in this essay describing the typical slave narrative: Wright, like the ex-slave, after a more or less chronological, episodic account of the conditions of slavery/Jim Crow, including a particularly vivid description of the difficulty or near impossibility—but also the inescapable necessity—of attaining full literacy, tells how he escaped from southern bondage, fleeing toward what he imagined

would be freedom, a new identity, and the opportunity to exercise his hard-won literacy in a northern, free-state city. That he did not find exactly what he expected in Chicago and New York changes nothing about *Black Boy* itself: neither did Douglass find everything he anticipated or desired in the North, but that personally unhappy fact in no way affects his *Narrative*. Wright, impelled by a nascent sense of freedom that grew within him in direct proportion to his increasing literacy (particularly in the reading of realistic and naturalistic fiction), fled the world of the South, and abandoned the identity that world had imposed upon him ("I was what the white South called a 'nigger'"), in search of another identity, the identity of a writer, precisely that writer we know as "Richard Wright." "From where in this southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom?"[22] Wright could discover only one answer to his question: "It had been only through books . . . that I had managed to keep myself alive in a negatively vital way" (p. 282). It was in his ability to construe letters and in the bare possibility of putting his life into writing that Wright "caught a sense of freedom" and knew that he must work out a new identity. "I could submit and live the life of a genial slave," Wright says, "but," he adds, "that was impossible" (p. 276). It was impossible because, like Douglass and other slaves, he had arrived at the crossroads where the three paths of literacy, identity, freedom met, and after such knowledge there was no turning back.

Black Boy resembles slave narratives in many ways but in other ways it is crucially different from its predecessors and ancestors. It is of more than trivial insignificance that Wright's narrative does not begin with "I was born," nor is it under the guidance of any intention or impulse other than its own, and while his book is largely episodic in structure, it is also—precisely by exercise of symbolic memory—"emplotted" and "configurational" in such a way as to construe "significant wholes out of scattered events." Ultimately, Wright freed himself from the South—at least this is what his narrative recounts—and he was also fortunately free, as the ex-slaves generally were not, from abolitionist control and free to exercise that creative memory that was peculiarly his. On the penultimate page of *Black Boy* Wright says, "I was leaving the South to fling myself into the unknown, to meet other situations that would perhaps elicit from me other responses. And if I could meet enough of a different life, then, perhaps, gradually and slowly I might learn who I was, what I might be. I was not leaving the South to forget the South, but so that some day I might understand it, might come to know what its rigors had done to me, to its children. I fled so that the numbness of my defensive living might thaw out and let me feel the pain—years later and far away—of what living in the South had meant." Here Wright not only exercises memory but also talks about it, reflecting

on its creative, therapeutic, redemptive, and liberating capacities. In his conclusion Wright harks back to the themes and the form of the slave narratives, and at the same time he anticipates theme and form in a great deal of more recent Afro-American writing, perhaps most notably in *Invisible Man*. *Black Boy* is like a nexus joining slave narratives of the past to the most fully developed literary creations of the present: through the power of symbolic memory it transforms the earlier narrative mode into what everyone must recognize as imaginative, creative literature, both autobiography and fiction. In their narratives we might say, the ex-slaves did that which, all unknowingly on their part and only when joined to capacities and possibilities not available to them, led right on to the tradition of Afro-American literature as we know it now.

NOTES

[1] Professor Ricoeur has generously given me permission to quote from this unpublished paper.

[2] I have in mind such illustrations as the large drawing reproduced as frontispiece to John Andrew Jackson's *Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1862), described as a "Facsimile of the gimlet which I used to bore a hole in the deck of the vessel"; the engraved drawing of a torture machine reproduced on p. 47 of *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1838); and the "REPRESENTATION OF THE BOX, 3 feet 1 inch long, 2 feet wide, 2 feet 6 inches high," in which Henry Box Brown travelled by freight from Richmond to Philadelphia, reproduced following the text of the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns*. (Boston: Brown & Stearns, 1849). The very title of Box Brown's *Narrative* demonstrates something of the mixed mode of slave narratives. On the question of the text of Brown's narrative see also notes 4 and 12 below.

[3] Douglass' *Narrative* diverges from the master plan on E4 (he was himself the slave who refused to be whipped), E8 (slave auctions happened not to fall within his experience, but he does talk of the separation of mothers and children and the systematic destruction of slave families), and E10 (he refuses to tell how he escaped because to do so would close one escape route to those still in slavery; in the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* he reveals that his escape was different from the conventional one). For the purposes of the present essay—

and also, I think, in general—the *Narrative* of 1845 is a much more interesting and a better book than Douglass' two later autobiographical texts: *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). These latter two are diffuse productions (*Bondage and Freedom* is three to four times longer than *Narrative*, *Life and Times* five to six times longer) that dissipate the focalized energy of the *Narrative* in lengthy accounts of post-slavery activities—abolitionist speeches, recollections of friends, trips abroad, etc. In interesting ways it seems to me that the relative weakness of these two later books is analogous to a similar weakness in the extended version of Richard Wright's autobiography published as *American Hunger* (orginally conceived as part of the same text as *Black Boy*).

[4] This is true of the version labelled "first English edition"—*Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Manchester: Lee & Glynn, 1851)—but not of the earlier American edition—*Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns*. (Boston: Brown & Stearns, 1849). On the beginning of the American edition see the discussion later in this essay, and on the relationship between the two texts of Brown's narrative see note 12 below.

[5] Douglass' *Narrative* begins this way. Neither *Bondage and Freedom* nor *Life and Times* starts with the existential assertion. This is one thing, though by no means the only or the most important one, that removes the latter two books from the category of slave narrative. It is as if by 1855 and even more by 1881 Frederick Douglass' existence and his identity were secure enough and sufficiently well known that he no longer felt the necessity of the first and basic assertion.

[6] With the exception of William Parker's "The Freedman's Story" (published in the February and March 1866 issues of *Atlantic Monthly*) all the narratives listed were separate publications. There are many more brief "narratives"—so brief that they hardly warrant the title "narrative": from a single short paragraph to three or four pages in length—that begin with "I was born"; there are, for example, twenty-five or thirty such in the collection of Benjamin Drew published as *The Refugee: A North-Side View of Slavery*. I have not tried to multiply the instances by citing minor examples; those listed in the text include the most important of the narratives—Roper, Bibb, W. W. Brown, Douglass, Thompson, Ward, Pennington, Steward, Clarke, the Crafts—even James Williams, though it is generally agreed that his narrative is a fraud perpetrated on an unwitting amanuensis, John Greenleaf Whittier. In addition to those listed in the text, there are a number of other narratives that begin with only slight variations on the formulaic tag—

William Hayden: "The subject of this narrative was born"; Moses Grandy: "My name is Moses Grandy; I was born"; Andrew Jackson: "I, Andrew Jackson, was born"; Elizabeth Keckley: "My life has been an eventful one. I was born"; Thomas L. Johnson: "According to information received from my mother, if the reckoning is correct, I was born. . . ." Perhaps more interesting than these is the variation played by Solomon Northup, who was born a free man in New York State and was kidnapped and sent into slavery for twelve years; thus he commences not with "I was born" but with "Having been born a freeman"—as it were the participial contingency that endows his narrative with a special poignancy and a marked difference from other narratives.

There is a nice and ironic turn on the "I was born" insistence in the rather foolish scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Chapter XX) when Topsy famously opines that she was not made but just "grow'd." Miss Ophelia catechizes her: " 'Where were you born?' 'Never was born!' persisted Topsy." Escaped slaves who hadn't Topsy's peculiar combination of Stowe-ic resignation and manic high spirits in the face of an imposed non-identity, non-existence were impelled to assert over and over, "I *was* born."

[7] Douglass' title is classic to the degree that it is virtually repeated by Henry Bibb, changing only the name in the formula and inserting "Adventures," presumably to attract spectacle-loving readers: *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. Douglass' *Narrative* was published in 1845, Bibb's in 1849. I suspect that Bibb derived his title directly from Douglass. That ex-slaves writing their narratives were aware of earlier productions by fellow ex-slaves (and thus were impelled to sameness in narrative by outright imitation as well as by the conditions of narration adduced in the text above) is made clear in the preface to *The Life of John Thompson, A Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape. Written by Himself* (Worcester: Published by John Thompson, 1856), p. v: "It was suggested to me about two years since, after relating to many the main facts relative to my bondage and escape to the land of freedom, that it would be a desirable thing to put these facts into permanent form. I first sought to discover what had been said by other partners in bondage once, but in freedom now. . . . " With this forewarning the reader should not be surprised to discover that Thompson's narrative follows the conventions of the form very closely indeed.

[8] However much Douglass changed his narrative in successive incarnations—the opening paragraph, for example, underwent considerable transformation—he chose to retain this sentence intact. It occurs on p. 52 of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass . . .* , ed. Benjamin Quarles (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); on p. 132 of *My Bon-*

dage and My Freedom, intro. Philip S. Foner (New York, 1969); and on p. 72 of *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, intro. Rayford W. Logan (New York, 1962).

[9] For convenience I have adopted this list from John F. Bayliss' introduction to *Black Slave Narratives* (New York, 1970), p. 18. As will be apparent, however, I do not agree with the point Bayliss wishes to make with his list. Having quoted from Marion Wilson Starling's unpublished dissertation, "The Black Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History," to the effect that the slave narratives, except those from Equiano and Douglass, are not generally very distinguished as literature, Bayliss continues: "Starling is being unfair here since the narratives do show a diversity of interesting styles. . . . The leading narratives, such as those of Douglass, William Wells Brown, Ball, Bibb, Henson, Northup, Pennington, and Roper deserve to be considered for a place in American literature, a place beyond the merely historical." Since Ball's narrative was written by one "Mr. Fisher" and Northup's by David Wilson, and since Henson's narrative shows a good deal of the charlantry one might expect from a man who billed himself as "The Original Uncle Tom," it seems at best a strategic error for Bayliss to include them among those slave narratives said to show the greatest literary distinction. To put it another way, it would be neither surprising nor specially meritorious if Mr. Fisher (a white man), David Wilson (a white man), and Josiah Henson (The Original Uncle Tom) were to display "a diversity of interesting styles" when their narratives are put alongside those by Douglass, W. W. Brown, Bibb, Pennington, and Roper. But the really interesting fact, as I shall argue in the text, is that they do *not* show a diversity of interesting styles.

[10] Here we discover another minor but revealing detail of the convention establishing itself. Just as it became conventional to have a signed portrait and authenticating letters/prefaces, so it became at least semi-conventional to have an imprint reading more or less like this: "Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 25 Cornhill." A Cornhill address is given for, among others, the narratives of Douglass, William Wells Brown, Box Brown, Thomas Jones, Josiah Henson, Moses Grandy, and James Williams. The last of these is especially interesting for, although it seems that his narrative is at least semi-fraudulent, Williams is on this point, as on so many others, altogether representative.

[11] *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*. . . . (Boston: Brown & Stearns, 1849), p. 25.

[12] The question of the text of Brown's *Narrative* is a good deal more complicated than I have space to show, but that complication rather strengthens than invalidates my argument above. The text I analyze above was published in Boston in 1849. In 1851 a "first English edition" was published in Manchester with the specification "Written by

Himself." It would appear that in preparing the American edition Stearns worked from a ms. copy of what would be published two years later as the first English edition—or from some ur-text lying behind both. In any case, Stearns has laid on the True Abolitionist Style very heavily, but there is already, in the version "Written by Himself," a good deal of the abolitionist manner present in diction, syntax, and tone. If the first English edition was really written by Brown this would make his case parallel to the case of Henry Bibb, discussed below, where the abolitionist style insinuates itself into the text and takes over the style of the writing even when that is actually done by an ex-slave. This is not the place for it, but the relationship between the two texts, the variations that occur in them, and the explanation for those variations would provide the subject for an immensely interesting study.

[13] *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River, in Louisiana* (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1853), p. xv. References in the text are to this first edition.

[14] I am surprised that Robert Stepto, in his excellent analysis of the internal workings of the Wilson/Northup book, doesn't make more of this question of where to locate the real authority of the book. See *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana, Ill., 1979), pp. 11-16.

Whether intentionally or not, Gilbert Osofsky badly misleads readers of the book unfortunately called *Puttin' On Ole Massa* when he fails to include the "Editor's Preface" by David Wilson with his printing of *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup*. There is nothing in Osofsky's text to suggest that David Wilson or anyone else but Northup had anything to do with the narrative—on the contrary: "Northup, Brown, and Bibb, as their autobiographies demonstrate, were men of creativity, wisdom and talent. Each was capable of writing his life story with sophistication" (*Puttin' On Ole Massa* [New York, 1969], p. 44). Northup precisely does *not* write his life story, either with or without sophistication, and Osofsky is guilty of badly obscuring this fact. Osofsky's literary judgement, with two-thirds of which I do not agree, is that "The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and Solomon Northup fuse imaginative style with keenness of insight. They are penetrating and self-critical, superior autobiography by any standards" (p. 10).

[15] To anticipate one possible objection, I would argue that the case is essentially different with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written by Alex Haley. To put it simply, there were many things in common between Haley and Malcolm X; between white amanuenses/editors/authors and ex-slaves, on the other hand, almost nothing was shared.

[16] *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself.* With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack (New York: Published by the Author; 5 Spruce Street, 1849), p. i. Page citations in the text are from this first edition.

It is a great pity that in modern reprintings of slave narratives—the three in Osofsky's *Puttin' On Ole Massa*, for example—the illustrations in the originals are omitted. A modern reader misses much of the flavor of a narrative like Bibb's when the illustrations, so full of pathos and tender sentiment, not to mention some exquisite cruelty and violence, are not with the text. The two illustrations on p. 45 (captions: "Can a mother forget her suckling child?" and "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel"), the one on p. 53 ("Never mind the money"), and the one on p. 81 ("My heart is almost broken") can be taken as typical. An interesting psychological fact about the illustrations in Bibb's narrative is that of the twenty-one total, eighteen involve some form of physical cruelty, torture, or brutality. The uncaptioned illustration of p. 133 of two naked slaves on whom some infernal punishment is being practised says much about (in Matlack's phrase) the reader's feverish thirst for gushing beautiful fountains "started from beneath the rod of violence."

[17] Or 1852, the date of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe recognized a kindred novelistic spirit when she read one (just as David Wilson/Solomon Northup did). In 1851, when she was writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe wrote to Frederick Douglass saying that she was seeking information about life on a cotton plantation for her novel: "I have before me an able paper written by a southern planter in which the details & modus operandi are given from his point of sight—I am anxious to have some more from another standpoint—I wish to be able to make a picture that shall be graphic & true to nature in its details—Such a person as *Henry Bibb*, if in this country, might give me just the kind of information I desire." This letter is dated July 9, 1851 and has been transcribed from a photographic copy reproduced in Ellen Moers, *Harriet Beecher Stowe and American Literature* (Hartford, Conn.: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1978), p. 14.

[18] Since writing the above, I discover that in his *Life and Times* Douglass says of the conclusion of his abolitionist work, "Othello's occupation was gone" (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1962, p. 373), but this still seems to me rather a different matter from the white sponsor's invariant allusion to Othello in attesting to the truthfulness of the black narrator's account.

A contemporary reviewer of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* wrote, in *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* (July 1789), "This is 'a round unvarnished tale' of the chequered adventures of an African. . . . "(see

appendix to vol. I of *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, ed. Paul Edwards [London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969].

John Greenleaf Whittier, though stung once in his sponsorship of James Williams' *Narrative*, did not shrink from a second, similar venture, writing, in his "introductory note" to the *Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom") —* also known as *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life From 1789 to 1879*—"The early life of the author, as a slave, . . . proves that in the terrible pictures of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' there is 'nothing extenuate or aught set down in malice'" (Boston: B. B. Russell & Co., 1879, p. viii).

[19] Quoted by Philip S. Foner in the introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, pp. xi-xii.

[20] Both quotations from Benjamin Quarles, "The Breach Between Douglass and Garrison," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIII (April 1938), p. 147, note 19, and p. 154.

[21] The list is from Nichols' unpublished doctoral dissertation (Brown University, 1948), "A Study of the Slave Narrative," p. 9.

[22] *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York, 1966), p. 282.