

**Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative**



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**BLACK MESSAGE/WHITE ENVELOPE:**  
**Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative**

*by John Sekora*

How many things people notions we bring with us into  
the world, how many possibilities and also restrictions  
of possibility. . . . To understand just one life, you  
have to swallow the world.

– Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

Slave narratives remain the most important and most neglected body of early American writing. The journey back in the study of black American life has of course always led to the narratives, long recognized, notwithstanding their diversity, as chronologically and psychologically the ground upon which later black writing is based. From Chesnutt to Gaines, poets, novelists, and dramatists had often repeated this truth before scholars were willing to attend.

They remained obscure so long for many reasons, some of which will be suggested in later portions of this essay. Obviously they little appealed to those persons intent upon creating a triumphal Master Text of American history and literature. After the Civil War and under the aegis of “national reconciliation,” they were dismissed as, at best, irrelevant and outdated curiosities. When proslavery apologetics grew as common as Jim Crow laws at the turn of the century, such dismissals became yet more total; those few scholars who knew the narratives disclaimed them as misleading, inaccurate, tainted. By the 1930s, when Ulrich Phillips began his series of influential historical studies, they were not merely ignored; they were actively repudiated. Not until the end of World War II did this consensus among historians begin to disappear.<sup>1</sup>

But disappear it did – slowly. The oral histories gathered in 1936–38 by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, contributed greatly to this reevaluation. Assembled for the Library of Congress under the heading “Slave Narrative Collection,” these twentieth-century accounts prompted young historians and folklorists to ask again about the importance of earlier centuries. In 1944 American historians were goaded once more when a Swedish scholar produced a massive, two-volume interpretation of the history of race relations in the United States. Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* argued not only the centrality of slavery for American history, but also the centrality of all black history. Within a decade, revisionist historians, led by John Hope Franklin, Herbert Aptheker, and Frank Tannenbaum, began to tell a different story of slavery and in so doing partially recovered the value of the slave narratives. This recovery, it should be noted, entailed the incorporation of the earlier work of such black historians as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson,

and Charles S. Johnson, upon whom the importance of the narratives had never been lost.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter two generations of historians have done once more what the abolitionists had done 100 years before: verified the facticity of the narratives against relevant contemporary documents, and, after intense scrutiny, established conclusively their factual reliability and authenticity. Benjamin Quarles, John Blassingame, Sterling Stuckey, Eugene Genovese, and Lawrence Levine – to name but a few scholars – have made the narratives the indispensable element of major studies. Their influence has been such that few students now doubt the historical veracity of the narratives. Indeed, most recognize them as (in Arna Bontemps's phrase) the Rosetta Stones of earlier America.

Although literary scholars have been slower than historians to put the narratives to full use, the former struggled most to keep them in public view. Bontemps spent much of his career locating, preserving, editing, and publicizing them. His efforts were needed because, outside journals specializing in Afro-American writing, publishers were reluctant to commit themselves. Two valuable dissertations long sought publication, even though they proved essential to students, whatever their discipline. In 1949 Charles H. Nichols completed, at Brown, his Ph.D. dissertation, "A Study of the Slave Narrative," but could find no American publisher. Finally published as *Many Thousand Gone* in the Netherlands in 1965, the University of Indiana then reprinted it in 1969. Yet more striking is the case of the 1946 dissertation by Marion Wilson Starling, "The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History," which found a publisher only thirty-five years later – in 1981. Because Starling's study has been required reading for two generations of literary students, the terms of its present publication must seem ambiguous: the word *literary* has been dropped from its subtitle.

Many literary scholars no doubt awaited the historians' judgment on the historical authenticity of the narrators. Others were daunted by the sheer volume and diversity of the writings called slave narratives. (As we shall see, issues of provenance in the narratives are often thornier for the critic than for the historian.) Before the Emancipation Proclamation at least two major types appeared. The earlier includes the nearly 100 narratives published separately – as broadside, pamphlet, or book – between about 1760 and 1863. Later, brief accounts of slave lives were published in abolitionist periodicals from about 1830 to 1863. These latter number well over 400, range in length from a paragraph or two to several pages, appeared in black periodicals and white alike, and were sometimes reprinted in book-length collections of slave experiences.

As evidence of the need for legislation during the war, the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission in 1863 gathered and printed about fifty narratives obtained in interviews. Between the end of the war and the turn of the century at least sixty-seven additional men and women born in slavery produced book-length accounts of their lives, the most famous of course being Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901). The largest body of narratives ever assembled were the 2194 interviews of former slaves gathered for the WPA in 1936–38 and published in toto for the first time in 1972. To these could be added the hundreds of letters to and from slaves preserved in antebellum newspapers and manuscript collections; and recent books like *All God's*

*Dangers* (1974), the life of Nate Shaw compiled by Theodore Rosengarten.<sup>3</sup>

Such is the spectrum of writings known as slave narratives, a term originally reserved for the separately published antebellum accounts, but whose widened application over time and circumstance speaks of a generic power present even in periods of institutional neglect. Eighteenth-century examples, like many other American prose works, used the word "narrative" prominently in their titles, often as the first substantive word; the phrases "runaway slave," "fugitive slave," "escaped slave" were regularly added early in the nineteenth century. By the early 1830s at the latest, sponsors, printers, and reviewers were writing of a distinct literary genre. Certainly readers were by then normally calling accounts of slave life, as related by a present or former slave, "slave narratives."

At present, the rough quarrels over historical authenticity have been settled beyond reasonable question, and the central importance of the separately published narratives is acknowledged. Yet their literary value remains moot. Although literary critics and scholars are at last interested in the narratives, they disagree widely not only on methods of approach but also on definitions of the subject. The issue of historical authenticity has been resolved, but that of literary authority remains. To put the matter in terms of contemporary debate, some critics would hold that the slave faced a paralyzing void of otherness. Houston A. Baker, Jr., puts this case well when he says:

For the black slave, the white externality provided no ontological or ideological certainties; in fact, it explicitly denied slaves the ground for being. . . . Instead of the ebullient sense of a new land offering limitless opportunities, the slave staring into the heart of whiteness around him, must have felt as though he had been flung into existence without a human purpose.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, others would offer the certitude of writing itself. Describing the formation of a black literary tradition, Martha K. Cobb argues for the importance of technique in situating slave writing:

The first-person voice presents the particularity of point of view that allows the narrator-protagonist the distinctive advantage of projecting his image, ordering his experiences, and presenting his thoughts in the context of his own understanding of black reality as it had worked itself out in his own life. . . . It is a persistent defining and interpreting of personal, human, and moral identity, hence one's worth, on the slave narrator's own terms rather than on terms imposed by the society that has enslaved him or her.<sup>5</sup>

In significant ways, each approach is equally true and equally false. What links them is the presumption that the essential questions concerning the narrative as literary form have been satisfactorily answered. I shall contend that, insofar as literary history is the history of literary forms, the study of the slave narrative is just beginning. For the narratives as a group continue to pose as large a set of problems for literary history as does any body of American writings; literary authority is a different matter from historical veracity. Still open today are the fundamental questions of

literary history. Do the slave narratives in fact represent a distinct literary genre? If not, why not? If so, what are its distinguishing characteristics? Are these characteristics relatively uniform throughout its history? What are the sources of variation and change? Is change great or small during that history? Are the narratives a popular or an elite literary form? Do they represent a species of autobiography? Why (and how) do they begin? Why (and how) do they come to an end? Such questions converge in the cluster of meanings implicit in the term *authority*: the condition of begetting, beginning, continuing, and controlling a written text. In Hegelian terms, the issues are parentage, propriety, property, and possession.

## I

I was myself within the circle, so that I neither saw nor  
heard as those without might see and hear.

—Frederick Douglass

Entitlement of a Hegelian sort is in fact one of the foremost issues in the history of American slavery. Slaveowners possessed the increasingly elaborate state codes controlling the labor and physical being of slaves. Yet they sought more—even the words, the very language of their slaves. To masters, the words of slaves appeared doubly significant. On the one hand, they were intimate, the personal expression of self and world. On the other, they were potent, lethal things. By seeking to control slave language, masters sought to exact slave complicity in their own subjugation. Among other means, masters demanded that slaves address them by the master's self-conferred title of "General" or "Colonel." The more ludicrous the artifice, it seems, the more obsessively did masters press for its use: slaves alone could entitle masters. Owners also sent spies into the fields to question the field slaves, as though out of normal curiosity, as to how kindly their masters were. This tactic too reveals the dependence of masters upon bondsmen: the feared power of words and the length to which owners would dissemble in order to construct and control a master text of their own lives. The self-conceptions of such owners demanded, insatiably, the right words, the *proper* answers. For the proper answers, a slave could keep his life intact. With the proper answers, an owner could keep his master text intact. What remains constant in this array of linguistic negotiations is the master's compulsion of the slave to authorize the master's power.<sup>6</sup>

The inescapable presence of such negotiations—in all of their forms—makes slavery very much a literary matter. Slavery and the language of slavery are virtually coextensive. Of the slave narratives, one must ask: Who is entitled to claim, to possess these lives? In whose language do they appear? What historical conditions permit or demand their appearance? The earliest narrative cited by Starling is the ten-page transcript of a trial conducted in Boston 3 August to 2 November 1703. *Adam Negro's Tryall* claims attention in Massachusetts because the trial rehearses the public quarrel

of two prominent figures over slavery. Judge Samuel Sewell of the Superior Court of Suffolk County had published an antislavery pamphlet, *The Selling of Joseph*. In 1701 a wealthy slaveowner, John Saffin, replied in a proslavery tract describing his troubles with a slave named Adam, who according to Saffin not only shirked his tasks but had the audacity to run away, seeking protection from Sewell. The trial in 1703 takes place over the terms of Adam's bondage because none of the principals will relent. In its transcript Adam does recount a small portion of his life in response to interrogation; most of the putative information about his character, however, comes from witnesses for Saffin. His testimony anticipating abolitionist narratives a century later: Adam is himself but a proximate cause and marginal participant in a public dispute between white groups. He may not possess his own narrative. Nonetheless, in an appeal over which Sewell presides, a jury grants his manumission.<sup>7</sup>

Although *Adam Negro's Tryall* does not give us Adam's account of his life in his own words, it does suggest a way in which a slave's narrative will reach print; for the terms of acceptability are inscribed in the text itself. The case is different with the narrative of Briton Hammon (1760), usually considered the first by an American slave. Hammon's is a fourteen-page tale of adventure and deliverance dictated to an amanuensis-editor who shapes it into the popular form of captivity narrative. Dozens of stories of Indian captivity had been published between 1680 and 1760, all fashioned to represent the trials of a devout Christian in the savage and heathen hands of an Indian tribe. An oft-used model was Cotton Mather's *Decennium Luctuosum: An History of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Long War, which New-England Hath Had with the Indian Salvages* (1699). Hammon's story incorporates two atypical elements beyond: it describes the Indians of Florida, and it features a slave whose spiritual error was to flee his owner's protection. Its elephantine title page sketches story and appeal alike:

A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man, – Servant to General Winslow, of Marshfield, in New-England; Who Returned to Boston, after Having Been Absent Almost Thirteen Years. Containing An Account of the many Hardships he underwent from the Time he left his Master's House, in the Year 1747, to the Time of his Return to Boston. – How he was cast away in the Capes of Florida; – the horrid Cruelty and inhuman Barbarity of the Indians in murdering the whole Ship's Crew; – the Manner of his being carry'd by them into Captivity. Also, An Account of his being Confined Four Years and Seven Months in a close Dungeon; – And the remarkable Manner in which he met with his good old Master in London; who returned to New-England a Passenger, in the same Ship.

Like Daniel Defoe's, Hammon's title page effectively summarizes the location and frequency of his thrills and tremors. Although he has had, by any measure, an extraordinary career, in his preface he minimizes its wonder. He shall restrict himself severely in the narrative, leaving all acts of interpretation to his betters:

As my Capacities and Conditions of Life are very low, it cannot be expected that I should make those Remarks on the Sufferings I

have met with, or the kind Providence of a good GOD for my Preservation, as one in a higher Station; but shall leave that to the Reader as he goes along, and so I shall only relate Matters of Fact as they occur to my Mind.

The decisive portion of this finely-wrought sentence would seem to be its acknowledgment of a status that is "very low." Having endured "Uncommon Sufferings" because he looked for freedom outside the security and civilization of "his Master's House," Hammon has learned a pious lesson. He will claim none of the freedom to provide a comprehensive text – even of his own life. The moral and literary meaning of that life will be determined by others – by men of *higher station*, like "his good Ole Master." Rather than create his own master text, Hammon contents himself with the recollection of "Matters of Fact" that confirm his master's text.

But there is more at work in the publicizing of Hammon's narrative. It was printed by Green and Russell in Boston, where (presumably) earlier in 1760 also appeared the captivity narrative of a young white man, Thomas Brown, whose title page indicates its relation to Hammon's:

A plain  
NARRATIVE  
Of the  
UNCOMMON SUFFERINGS,  
and  
Remarkable Deliverance  
of  
THOMAS BROWN  
Of Charlestown, in New-England;  
Who returned to his Father's House the Beginning of Jan. 1760,  
after having been absent three Years and about eight Months:  
CONTAINING  
An Account of the Engagement between a Party of English,  
commanded by Maj. Rogers, and a Party of French and Indians,  
in Jan. 1757; in which Capt. Spikeman was kill'd; and the  
Author of this Narrative having receiving three Wounds (one of  
which thro' his Body) he was left for Dead on the Field of  
Battle: –  
How he was taken Captive by the Indians, and carried to  
Canada, and from thence to the Mississippi; where he lived about  
a Year, and was again sent to Canada: – During all which Time  
he was not only in constant Peril of his own Life; but had the  
Mortification of being an Eye-Witness of divers Tortures, and  
shocking Cruelties, that were practised by the Indians on several  
English Prisoners; – one of whom he saw burnt to Death,  
another tied to a Tree and his Entrails drawn out, Etc. Etc.

The January 1760 date and the appearance of at least three editions within that year suggest that the Brown narrative may have been published before Hammon's and was in fact its immediate model. Brown's preface is quite similar, but emphasizes age:

As I am but a Youth, I shall not make those Remarks on the  
Difficulties I have met with, or the kind Appearances of a good

GOD for my Preservation, as one of riper Years might do; but shall leave that to the Reader as he goes along, and shall only beg his Prayers, that Mercies and Afflictions may be sanctified to me, and relate Matters of Fact as they occur to my Mind. —

Neither Hammon nor Brown is permitted to possess his life story. One is disqualified by youth, the other by his lowly condition as slave. Or perhaps both are disqualified for reasons of class and education. Whatever the circumstance, the slave narrative is born into a world of literary confinement — designated by otherness, plainness, facticity, and dictated forms.

William L. Andrews, whose essay “The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative, 1760–1810,” is the best study of the early narrative, points out that only those published in Great Britain were likely to possess a distinctive narrative voice.<sup>8</sup> The most famous of these, that of Olaudah Equiano, was printed in London in 1789 and was the earliest to be written by its subject. Equiano could not be considered a representative author in any case, for he spent relatively few years in the Americas, having been born in what is now Nigeria and spending much of his later years in England. Yet, while significant distinctions may be drawn between narratives first published in Britain and those in the United States, a relationship among printers was soon formed across the Atlantic, with American editions, normally unchanged, following initial British publication. Equiano’s narrative was reprinted in New York within two years of the London edition and became the most influential narrative for earlier nineteenth-century abolitionist writing.

For another example, the pilgrimage and conversion story of John Marrant, first printed in London in 1785, relates the development of a religious calling (and exciting episodes of imminent martyrdom) in *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with J. Marrant, A Black (Now going to Preach the GOSPEL in Nova-Scotia)*. Although it was reprinted in Boston in 1789, its original edition evinces the pattern of editorial control present in Briton Hammon. The account was “Taken down from His Own Relation,” but then “Arranged, Corrected, and Published by the Rev. Mr. Aldridge.” In the preface, Aldridge assures readers that what follows is indeed a tale of the Lord’s wonderful dealings, *not* the mere story of a man. In Aldridge’s hands, Marrant’s life story is an exemplary tale of crossing “the fence, which marked the boundary between the wilderness and the cultivated country.” In the wilderness — that is, outside white institutions — Marrant is chastened by an encounter with the Cherokees, in whose lands “savage despotism exercised its most terrifying empire.” Lest readers worry overmuch about the presence of exotic life in the narrative, Aldridge concludes, “I have always preserved Mr. Marrant’s ideas, tho’ I could not his language. . . .” In this open admission, Marrant’s amanuensis-editor assumes a degree of control unacknowledged in Hammon. Both eschew interpretive questions of meaning and significance (beyond God’s providence). But Aldridge feels yet more constraint, reluctant as he is to allow Marrant to speak for himself. One need not be a philosopher of language to feel uncomfortable with such easy assumptions about the separability of language from ideas in the narrative of a human life. The discomfort is compounded, moreover, when one contemplates the literary result. For in Aldridge’s hands, Marrant’s story is every bit as utilitarian — as plain, artless, and factual — as Hammon’s.

Another exciting tale of Indian captivity, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770), is told by Gronniosaw, then “committed to paper by the elegant pen of a young lady of the town Leominster for her own private satisfaction.” Again, the captivity selected is imposed by Indians, not by white Americans; then a black life is reshaped, re-written for the “private satisfaction” of one of higher station. The pattern recurs whatever the subgenre of the narrative. *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa. . . . Related by Himself* (1798) is the earliest black version of the Franklinesque story of self-denial and quest for material success. It also represents the array of narratives in which an anonymous amanuensis declares that he or she has *added* nothing substantial but has been compelled to *omit* much.

Stories of criminals, particularly of their dying confessions, were as popular in America as they were in Britain. Printers of broadsides regularly advertised their eagerness to obtain any first-hand account. Because slaves had no legal status, the criminal slave was a type for which there was no clear white counterpart – the double outlaw. Confessions of black criminals were so eagerly sought that they represent the largest group of slave narratives published during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some examples:

*The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man: Who Was Executed at Worcester, October 20th, 1768. For a Rape Committed on the Body of One Deborah Metcalfe* (1768)

*Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain, a Negro, Who Was Executed at New-Haven, on the 20th Day of October, 1790, for a Rape, Committed on the 26th Day of May last* (1790)

*The Dying Confession of Pomp, A Negro Man* (1795)

*The Address of Abraham Johnstone, a Black Man, Who Was Hanged at Woodburg, in the County of Gloucester, and State of New Jersey . . . July 8, 1797. . . .* (1797)

Of course these “outlaw” accounts were filtered through an editor. For Pomp’s confession, a printer of popular broadsides, Jonathan Plummer, offered a melodramatic shaping of Pomp’s life, one that “endeavored to preserve the ideas” of the subject while taking “liberty to arrange the matter in my own way, to word his thoughts more elegantly . . . than he was able to express them.” As the narrative of a talented and successful man like Venture could be cast into the institutional mold, so too the criminal confession could be shaped to a similar end: Pomp confesses that he had had a decent master yet was driven to murder “by fits and lunacy,” by listening to his own inner voices. Crime and madness are allied.<sup>9</sup>

The dying criminal stood as powerful witness to the beauties of the American garden, for he spoke in its absence, defiled and ostracized in the wilderness. The complementary narrative of religious conversion offered such testimony from within, from someone not fatally defiled. Perhaps inspired by the success of *The Negro Servant*, a devotional tract first published in London late in the eighteenth century and

distributed by the American Tract Society, narratives of conversion and of ministerial labors grew in length and complexity during the early nineteenth century, as they became vehicles not only of religious proselytizing but also of incipient abolitionist sentiment. The context is once more the need of a white institution to demonstrate its authority, establishing its appeal even to the lowliest of the low. Here an evangelical, usually Methodist, church presses its claim that self-reliance and worldly success can accompany spiritual redemption. In time that claim will be pressed to its limit and bring some churches into collision with other American institutions, especially those upholding slavery. In literary terms, when a success story is written within a white Christian church, then master and slave texts commingle.

The wide circulation of such texts among former slaves is well-known, the most prominent writers in the form – George White and Richard Allen – tracing their inspiration to the work of predecessors. In the preface to his narrative White reports, “As reading the accounts of the lives and religious experiences of others, has often quickened and comforted my soul, and encouraged me in the way to heaven, I feel it my duty to present the friends of Jesus with a short detail of the dealings of God toward me; in my conversion, temptations, religious conflicts, call to preach, and sufferings therein; hoping to administer some of those benefits to them, which I have derived from the writings of others on the same subject.” (Another probable sign that writers were reading one another is the scene in at least five eighteenth-century narratives of the subject’s holding a book up to his ear, asking the book to talk to him.) White’s “detail” is indeed short and in form thoroughly familiar to readers of white ministerial narratives. According to William Andrews, it is the first narrative by an American-born former slave to struggle toward a personal memoir. A complementary interpretation would see in White’s story the clash of different forces and texts within the same institution.<sup>10</sup>

Within the history of a literary genre, each new work in the series both supports and subverts the series as a whole. Using a mandated form, White attempts to fulfill all requirements of the ministerial life. Yet because he is a former slave, his story cannot fit precisely the conventional mold. *A Brief Account of the Life, Experiences, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African. Written by Himself and Revised by a Friend* (1810) is a tract whose message is neither abolition nor rebellion. On the contrary, it is a paean to Methodism, an institution so compelling White will bear countless indignities in order to obtain full membership. Born a slave in Virginia in 1764, White recounts his twenty-six years in slavery, his manumission, and his later and ebullient conversion to Christianity. In fact his acceptance of religion soon grows into a vocation – an experience made familiar in many white ministerial narratives – for he realizes “God required me to preach his gospel.” Divine inspiration is, however, hardly adequate for entering a white institution by the front door. When he applies to the New York Methodist Conference for a license to preach, he is told, “It was the devil who was pushing me on to preach.” At odds, then, are two equally potent doctrines: the theological text of the Inner Light and the social text of black subordination.

In its modest way, White’s account articulates much of early Afro-American literary history. The narrative as text has of course been “Revised by a Friend,” but it is

also the earliest by a slave born in America to bear the distinction, "Written by Himself." The narrative as text of a life makes clear that White's yearning to preach is heaven-sent. As devout as Richard Allen, as patient as Josiah Henson, as confident as Booker T. Washington, White will not be written off. He chooses to view institutional resistance to his calling as *spiritual* discipline; he therefore returns several times to the board of examiners. While the master text of his age speaks of infernal temptation, he will listen solely to his own divine guidance, to his own personal text. Trusting in the latter, he and his narrative are eventually vindicated when in 1807 he is granted full status as a preacher.

White American institutions are thus deeply inscribed in the early slave narratives, to the extent that they will be published only when they bear the imprimatur as well as the nihil obstat of those institutions. Outside white civilization life is, in the preferred term of early editors, *savage*. Briton Hammon is physically able to dictate his story only after he has escaped the ravages of the Florida Indians and returned to the sanctity of his master's house. So far from recounting a distinctive Afro-American life, Hammon's narrative nowhere beyond the title page reveals that he is black. Gronniosaw and Marrant seek no autonomy of selfhood, but rather a freedom from self – the discipline of a white Christian church. Although Venture Smith often found himself cheated by white men and their organizations, his narrative can imagine no existence outside their confines. To his amanuensis-editor, at least, white institutions were divinely ordained as well as omnipotent. It is precisely the "insanity" of rebellion against such power that editors inscribed in the narratives of Arthur, Joseph Mountain, and Pomp. The master text is illuminated when we discover Joseph Mountain, convicted rapist awaiting death, astonished at "the indulgence" and "the lenity of the court" which has sentenced him to die.

George White, on the other hand, has read the master texts so well that a charge of savagery is never seriously at issue. His life argues that if such texts are to be accepted as "universal," they must embrace at least one former slave. By collating slave and master texts, White's narrative mediates the polarities of his time. His desire all along, he says, is for "liberty to speak from a text." Prefigured in that desire are the Promethean literary labors of the nineteenth century. Black liberty to speak from the text of the Bible heralds the formation of a separate black church; in White's life, it leads to his role in founding the AME Zion church. Black liberty to speak from the text of their own lives suggests a changing register in the voice of slave narratives; in their composition the narratives after 1830 would record the separation of the master text into southern and northern testaments.

## II

"Let us have the facts," said the people. So also said  
 Friend George Foster, who always wished to pin me  
 down to my simple narratives. "Give us the facts," said  
 Collins, "we will take care of the philosophy." . . .

“Tell your story, Frederick,” would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison. . . . 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 . . . long enough for a circumstantial statement of the facts which I felt almost everybody must know. Besides, I was growing and needed room.

– Frederick Douglass, 1855

Two scenes signify the literary history of the earlier slave narrative. For the mid-eighteenth-century narrative, it is Briton Hammon, prodigal slave and pious supplicant, walking penitently toward the home of General Winslow in Marshfield, Massachusetts. In this home, from which he had fled more than twelve years before, he will seek succor and reconciliation. For the early nineteenth century, the scene is more active: George White eloquently insisting upon his abilities before the Board of Examiners of the New York Methodist Conference. White seeks not succor but opportunity; the reconciliation he would enjoy lies not solely in his own situation but between the precepts and the practice of his church.

Such *tableaux vivantes* are certainly central to Afro-American literary history, yet they were at best peripheral to contemporary printers of books. For them the main business of writing lay elsewhere. We know from many sources that early white American writers were busy creating a Master Text of the triumphal American errand into the wilderness, collectively inscribing what John Seelye has called the American Protestant Epic. Within that epic, important chapters were devoted to narratives of captivity (trial at the savage, heathen hands of the Indian), of religious conversion, of criminal confession and repentance, of spiritual pilgrimage (from wilderness to garden), and of gospel labors (trial as minister of God’s word). On the margins of these chapters the earliest accounts of Afro-American life were written. As William L. Andrews suggests, the lives of exceptional slaves were recorded if and only if they were in all other important respects conformable to popular and familiar patterns of Anglo-American literary form. Such marginal writing represents the earliest instance in American literature of establishing sameness within difference, of exclusion by way of inclusion. For a Foucault, it would represent the process by which a society designates and isolates its opposite; obversely, it is the process by which that society displays and increases its power – by granting temporary, honorific status to non-members.

With abolitionist narratives after 1830 or so, the mode of inclusion is different. Once the issue of slavery has divided the Master Text of America, the experience of a former slave is of decisive literary importance. Some eighty antislavery societies had been formed by 1830, and before long most sought to publish slave lives as the most vivid and compelling vehicles of the justice of their cause. Yet while the issue of slavery has been transformed, we must ask whether the context of authorship has changed accordingly. Here the monumental scene is a meeting of the American Anti-

Slavery Society in Nantucket. After his escape Frederick Douglass discovers the power of Garrison's *Liberator*, the reading of which, he says, "sent a thrill of joy through my soul, such as I had never felt before!"

I could do but little; but what I could, I did with a joyful heart, and never felt happier than when in an anti-slavery meeting. I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was said so much better by others. But, while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket, on the 11th of August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people's meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren – with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide.<sup>11</sup>

While slavery is incidental to readers of Hammon and White, it is essential to Douglass's audience. Because he is "pleading the cause of my brethren" who are black and enslaved, his narrative has no precise antecedent in eighteenth-century American literature. The abolitionist narratives certainly represent a new stage and period in literary history. Against the earlier narratives, they display a greater length, an extended vocabulary, a different set of social attitudes and philosophic presuppositions. The interest, circulation, and sales they generate are vastly greater. They reveal a different way of ordering slave lives, a change immediately apparent in narrative structure. The escape is now usually pivotal in time and theme. More elaborate beginnings emphasize blood relations. Endings emphasize reconciliation with a different kind of social family/institution, not religious but political. Forms of discourse within the narratives thus acquire a different mix, from the predominant spiritual self-examination of Equiano and White to the political commentary of Douglass and William Wells Brown. Indeed, the later narratives are shaped nearly as much by moral and political interests as by the form of the life story.

These differences notwithstanding, the continuities of the period outweigh the changes. In the scene Douglass describes, two Master Texts of American experience confront one another, each armed with formidable institutional accoutrements. He speaks of the southern, proslavery vision of American history. But the occasion – the moral as well as the physical geography – is the northern abolitionist vision. He steps into a world in which the *Liberator* leads a network of dozens of printers and periodicals stretching from the Northeast to the Midwest. He learns of antislavery meetings because they are regular and publicly announced. He is prompted to attend because he has learned that blacks are not excluded. He is encouraged to speak and then to write because the abolitionist groups have decided that first-hand, eyewitness accounts by former slaves constitute the most damning indictment of slavery. He is able to continue such work because he has joined a loose but elaborate organization,

transatlantic in scope and resources, of clergymen, politicians, businessmen, writers, editors, printers, and advocates. For literary purposes, both slavery and antislavery have been institutionalized. Among white opponents, each views the other as traitor to the American mission; each is to the other the serpent in the American Eden. Each sees Douglass's entrance into this quarrel as a very serious matter — one that might alter the contemporary balance. Apologists for slavery did their utmost to discredit him; Garrison's forces did their best to publicize him. Yet the issue over which they fought was not Douglass the speaker or Douglass the author. Rather it was a narrower issue of their own defining. Douglass was important insofar as he represented the experience of slavery (and therefore of antislavery).

Defining the inner meaning of slavery to a tepid and confused northern white audience was the initial public task of most abolitionist societies. If they were to issue an alternative text of the American story, they were obliged to make it not only national but also psychologically compelling and rhetorically persuasive.<sup>12</sup> Materially their instruments were the printing press, the lecture platform, and the pulpit. In addition to a regular flow of gifted speakers, their vehicles included sermons, petitions, and pamphlets; whole newspapers and parts thereof; weekly, monthly, and quarterly journals; ballads, broadsides, and poetry; gift annuals and other collections; essays, dramas, novels, and travel books.<sup>13</sup> It is but small tribute to the power of the word to recall that Garrison had been apprenticed as a printer — “a trade which probably produced more abolitionist activists, in both Britain and American, than any other.”<sup>14</sup> Vitality in abolition meant that its text must *move* — through New England, New York City, Pennsylvania, the new farm lands from upstate New York across Ohio and Illinois, and Canada. Garrison wrote in 1832 that it would be the purpose of antislavery societies “to scatter tracts, like rain-drops, over the land, on the subject of slavery.” The Declaration of Sentiments adopted by the American Anti-Slavery Society at its founding convention vowed that the organization will “circulate unsparingly and extensively anti-slavery tracts and periodicals.”

White abolition societies both inherited and created a world of antislavery texts. Alice Adams's study of the period 1808–31 affirms the continuing influence of narratives like that of Equiano and those published by the American Tract Society. More recent and direct was the work of several local antislavery societies, the American Colonization Society, and many individual abolitionists like Benjamin Lundy. The newer groups who followed thus did not initiate the movement; rather they made it more radical, prominent, and immediate. By the mid-1830s, the new radical tenor had been established in periodicals by Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, the *Abolitionist*, the *African Observer*, the *American Anti-Slavery Almanac*, the *American Anti-Slavery Reporter*, the *Anti-Slavery Examiner*, the *Anti-Slavery Record*, the *Emancipator*, the *Herald of Freedom*, the *Liberator*, and *Slave's Friend*, and at least twenty other journals of some duration. Such landmarks in the literary history of slavery were rivaled in influence by a long series of pamphlets, among them Garrison's *Thoughts on African Colonization* (1832) and William Jay's *Inquiry into the Character and Tendency of the American Colonization Society and American Anti-Slavery Societies* (1835). Notwithstanding the myriad personal and regional differences among them, as one this new generation of agitators pressed its message of

moral urgency. In the first number of the *Liberator* for 1 January 1831, Garrison declared:

I am in earnest – I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat an inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.

Garrison's shouting did not rearrange the statuary, but it was certainly heard across the Atlantic. By July 1836 the Rev. Thomas Price, editor of Moses Roper's narrative, was ready to assist in the moral resurrection of the living. He wrote in the editor's preface to the first issue of *Slavery in America*:

*What can we do to rescue Christianity from reproach, and to save our American brethren from the natural consequences of their guilt in upholding this horrid system of impiety and wrong? It is to meet this inquiry, and to aid in the adoption of such measures as are calculated to arouse the conscience and to call forth the religious principles of the people of the United States, that this periodical is commenced.*

Urgency-conscience-insistence. These appeals suggest much of the quality of slave narratives after 1830. Because they summarize what white abolitionist sponsors sought in the antislavery texts they would publish, they indicate the institutional conditions under which many of the narratives were composed. Despite the enormous political changes occurring in America between the time of Briton Hammon and that of Frederick Douglass, the literary continuities are arresting. While they do promote a new way of understanding slavery, the changes in vocabulary, social attitude, and philosophical presupposition follow the revised agenda of the abolitionist movement. While they now emphasize the workings of "this horrid system of impiety and wrong," they continue to be ordered as life stories told in the first person. While they are often accounts of men and women undergoing profound transformation, they continue to be, in the main, recorded or edited or polished or reviewed or verified or completed by white sponsors. Because nearly thirty white antislavery societies played some part in the publication of narratives after 1830, the signal question is, what did abolitionists believe they were doing when they sponsored slave narratives?

Initially they were simply following precedent. British and American religious groups had printed accounts by and about slaves from the 1770s, with increasing stress upon their value as abolitionist documents. Nineteenth-century editors knew such writings well, citing and reprinting them in pamphlet, preface, and editorial. Indeed, it was their business to print as many as they could, as often as possible. For, as they often acknowledged to one another, they faced seemingly insuperable odds. Most white northerners were as indifferent as Garrison believed them to be; for them slavery was remote, abstract, inconsequential. It was the abolitionists' job to dispel that indifference. Once again their methods followed the British: in Garrison's words, at the opening of his *Thoughts*, "to employ active and intelligent agents to plead the cause incessantly, and to form auxiliary societies." While abolitionist writers would

reach the relatively educated audiences of the cities, it would henceforth be the agent-lecturer who would carry the cause boldly and vividly into the more rural parts of New England, New York, and the West.

Requiring large measures of courage, endurance, and rhetorical talent, agents stood in the flesh as witnesses against slavery. They were yet more valuable if they stood as eyewitnesses. The American Anti-Slavery Society at its first convention in 1833 called for the use of blacks, especially former slaves, as agents, arguing that only through their testimony would most northerners hear the victims' side of slavery. One of Garrison's correspondents put the case briefly:

The public have itching ears to hear a colored man speak, and particularly *a slave*. Multitudes will flock to hear one of his class speak. . . . It would be a good policy to employ a number of colored agents, if suitable ones can be found.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of an opportunity for a former slave to speak on a national platform should not be minimized. But neither should the demand for *suitability*. Briton Hammon and George White were allowed to tell of their lives because those lives could be absorbed into white social and literary forms. Black abolitionist lectures were likewise expected to embrace the rules of white antislavery decorum. As one midwestern periodical reported the highlights of a very long address by William Wells Brown, "His dignity of manner, his propriety of expression were more than we expected to see in one who had spent the early part of his life as a slave."<sup>16</sup>

Thus by the mid-1830s many abolitionist groups were actively seeking former slaves as well as free blacks. Obtaining articulate speakers for the lecture circuit was their primary goal, but they also sought out for publication the personal testimony of less sophisticated fugitives. (It is an unmistakable fact that white abolitionists often treated these two quite different groups of blacks in similar fashion.) Garrison, for instance, introduced the narrative of James Curry to readers of the *Liberator* (10 January 1840): "It is a real case, and no fiction, as written down from the lips of the self-emancipated bondman by a talented female who will accept our thanks for the favor she has done in communicating it for publication in the *Liberator*." In order to identify all possible black assistants, white abolitionists had by about 1837 developed a series of questions that, in one version or another, was used thereafter across the North and West. Proper interrogation would identify, then guide, a true abolitionist, Lundy counseled Garrison in 1829. Garrison strongly recommended its use by fledgling societies and periodicals. Theodore Weld used a questionnaire to select the first group of seventy traveling agents in 1836-37 and again, at the agents' first convention, to train the agents in techniques of speaking and organizing. Each speech was to include a detailed, forceful description of the conditions of the slave system, ordered according to the questions an indifferent or ignorant white audience would wish answered; an ardent appeal for slaves whose humanity was being denied; and a repudiation of the slaveholders, clergymen, and politicians who supported the system.

The list might be used by even the least experienced interviewer, for answers could be scrutinized later for value and authenticity. Developed as a routine method for resolving an immediate problem and discovering whether a black man or woman had

a story of interest to white audiences, interrogation had several consequences for literary history. Certainly it initiated the process through which many fugitives were transformed into speakers against slavery and then into authors of slave narratives. Besides Douglass, the authors who began as lecturers would include Henry Bibb, Henry Box Brown, William Wells Brown, Anthony Burns, Lewis and Milton Clarke, Ellen and William Craft, Josiah Henson, Lunsford Lane, James W. C. Pennington, Moses Grandy, Austin Steward, Henry Watson, and many others. (It also prompted the advent of professional black writers, for William Wells Brown was able to earn part of his living from his fiction and journalism of the mid-fifties, while Douglass was equally favored with the second version of his narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom* of 1855.)

As it led to the printing of the narratives, the abolitionist imprint was decisive in its predisposition for "facts" and for a particular ordering of those facts. Chancing upon a potentially usable black story, abolitionist sponsors concerned themselves with elemental questions: Did the subject actually exist? Was he or she actually a slave? Were the names, dates, places of the story factually reliable? Was the subject a suitable representative of the antislavery cause? These questions answered satisfactorily, how could the story be organized more persuasively? From such concern with factuality followed, on the one hand, a habitual attitude of disbelief toward black accounts. Agents and editors were frequently cautioned against credulity when listening to tales of slavery, and antislavery periodicals regularly noted instances of blacks *posing* as fugitives. Not black storytelling but white authentication made for usable narratives. Price, writing in *Slavery in America* (August 1837) of the narrative of Moses Roper, which he helped prepare, says the first question all readers will ask is, "Is it true?" By his own avowal, Price says yes, for Roper "has stood the ordeal of the most severe examination, he has been solemnly warned of the consequences of deception. . . ." On the other hand, there followed a heavy use of authenticating documents printed before and after the narrative itself. A frontispiece portrait and testimonial letters declared that the subject existed and was who he said he was. Letters testifying to this moral and intellectual character avowed that he was reporting events as he knew them. Many testify that they had heard the subject lecture long before the narrative reached written form. In his introduction to the narrative of Henry Bibb, Lucius Matlock goes further — citing those times he witnessed Bibb writing portions of his story. Through such devices editors and sponsors sought not merely facts but facticity — the careful layering of heterogeneous material into a collective and invulnerable whole. The process began with a series of collectively gathered questions, and often ended in a volume that was collectively written. If the story of a former slave was thus sandwiched between white abolitionist documents, the story did carry the aegis of a movement preaching historical veracity. The verifiable truth of that story, according to white abolitionists, is that the slave has precious little control over his life.

The facticity sought in abolitionist writing was, by definition, not that of individualized Afro-American life, but rather the concrete detail of lives spent under slavery. Reviews and advertisements for the narratives routinely noted that "slaves had a simple but moving story" to tell — use of the singular noun testifying to belief in an undifferentiated sameness of existence. Since these lives were nearly anonymous —

Garrisonians sometimes alleged that their black agents had no stories until the abolitionists gave them one — sponsors assumed in advance that they knew what slave lives should contain. Angelina Grimké's attitude is not at all unusual when, in a letter to Weld in 1838, she implies that she already knows what story a fugitive and stranger would tell: "Such narratives are greatly needed. Let it come burning from his own lips . . . it must do good. . . . Many and many a tale of romantic horror can the slaves tell."<sup>17</sup> Of course by 1838 antislavery workers like Grimké had grounds for assuming prior knowledge. They had elicited tales of "romantic horror" from fugitives and had sponsored them on the lecture circuit. Black agents commonly distributed announcements of meetings with such an appeal as "All who wish to hear the workings of Slavery from one of its own recipients are invited to attend." Audiences came in large numbers to the meetings, apparently to hear of phylogeny, not ontogeny. Describing himself as "a graduate of the peculiar institution," Douglass found praise both as a superior and as a representative example of the ex-slave, as in this account from the *Salem Register*:

The most wonderful performance of the evening was the address of Frederick Douglass himself a slave only four years ago! His remarks and his manner created the most indescribable sensations in the minds of those unaccustomed to hear *freemen* of color speak in public, much more to regard a *slave* as capable of such an effort. He was a living, speaking, *startling* proof of the folly, absurdity and inconsistency (to say nothing worse) of slavery.<sup>18</sup>

It was precisely this ability to startle the ignorant that reviewers singled out when Douglass later wrote his narrative. Designed "to exert a very wide influence on public opinion," Ephraim Peabody wrote, copies of the narrative "are scattered over the whole North, and all the theoretical arguments for or against slavery are feeble, compared with these accounts of living men of what they personally endured when under its dominion."<sup>19</sup> Because white abolitionists most often applauded black lecturers as *useful* agents of the antislavery cause, not surprisingly we find similar responses to the written narratives. Hence the conclusion to Peabody's review of Douglass: "He is one of the living evidences of that there is in the colored population of the South no natural incapacity for the enjoyment of freedom; and he occupies a position and possesses abilities which enable him, if he pursues a wise course, to be a most useful laborer in the cause of human rights" (78).

As personal identities were often absorbed into the abolitionist crusade, so too were personal narratives. Those published separately under the antislavery banner suggest how title pages could prepare readers for a proper, collective response:

*Slavery in the United States: 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* (1836)

*Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave; Who was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama. As related to J. G. Whittier* (1838)

*Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King, and His Experiences of Slavery in South Carolina. Written by Himself, Corrected and Arranged by Peter Nielson (1847).*

*Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution; during a Captivity of More than Twenty Years among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So-Called Christian States of North America (1848)*

*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 (1849)*

*Slave Life in Georgia: a Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave Now in England. Edited by L. A. Chamerovzow (1855)*

*Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, and England (1855)* NB: here the subject's name, Samuel Ringgold Ward, is excluded from the title of an autobiography.

*Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Fifty Years a Freeman (1857).*  
The narrative of Austin Steward.

*Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America. By Francis Fedric, an Escaped Slave (1863)*

As these titles suggest, antislavery societies sought to compile a moral geography of slavery, with accounts from each of the slave states and each of the main types of slave labor. In their search for "coverage," agents and editors were alert to novelty of circumstance – as in the methods of escape used by the Crafts and Box Brown – but only so long as it supported without subverting abolitionist doctrine. Several antislavery spokesmen worried that an emphasis upon full coverage would level issues of significance and obscure relevant distinctions, but they were nonetheless committed to "expose the wrongs of Slavery in all of their phases."

The facticity of exposure was declared not only in titles, but also in the many letters, prefaces, and introductions to the narratives. If readers neglected the essential information of the title page, the following pages would correct their expectations.

These pages . . . will present . . . a faithful view of the opinions and feelings of the colored population, constituting so large a portion of the people [in the South]. [The reader] will see here portrayed in the language of truth, by an eye witness and a slave, the sufferings, the hardships, and the evils which are inflicted upon the millions of human beings, in the name of the law of the land and of the Constitution of the United States.<sup>20</sup>

From the prospectus to Charles Ball's narrative, these words declare the collective emphasis of the antislavery movement. Ball's identity as a former slave has been doubted

to this day, yet there is no doubt about the goals of his tale. Lunceford Lane said the purpose of his story was to “cast some light upon the policy of a slaveholding community,” and Henry Bibb wrote that he allowed his story to appear in print only to expose “the sins and evils of slavery as far as possible.” Wells Brown used the standard phrase when he said he wrote to describe slavery “as it is, and its influence upon the morals and character of the American people.” As always Douglass put the issue with admirable brevity. His mission was to expose slavery, he wrote, “because to expose it is to kill it.” Narrators as individuals with particular stories were thus situated at the intersection of collectivizing forces. If he were to discover personalizing words for his life, he must do so within the institutional language of abolition. Indeed, some writers are apologetic that their own lives cannot be subordinated further. Austin Steward says he has heard all the arguments in favor of slavery many times and from many people who should know better. The weight of such defenses has drawn him into the fray:

The author is therefore the more willing – nay, anxious, to lay alongside of such arguments the history of his own life and experiences *as a slave*, that those who read may know what are some of the characteristics of that highly favored institution, which is sought to be preserved and perpetuated.

Moses Roper, in the preface to his narrative, protests in advance that he does not wish himself to appear “conspicuous” in the narrative that follows. Friends at antislavery meetings impelled him to offer his story, but he will do so only “with the view of exposing the cruel system of slavery.”

The growth of a national political movement with agents, branches, presses, and publications across the northern part of the United States and in Great Britain; the aggressive questioning of slave informants; the interviewing of potential black agents; the printing and frequent reprinting of every bit of information from every kind of informant by antislavery periodicals; the development of a lecture circuit across the North; in books, the extensive use of testimonials and documentary evidence of the truth of the author’s assertions regarding slavery – these and other institutional conventions serve as implicit guarantors in the act of reading a slave narrative. Certainly they guarantee credibility, but more, they testify to historical strength and moral vitality. Each little book is escorted by an army. The facticity of all elements of the slave narrative is essential here. For readers are not being asked to admire a style or to decipher a semantic code. Rather they are being goaded to “lend a helping hand to the extinction of that monstrous system which spoils all that is good in America,” in the words of Thomas Price. They are being recruited into that army.

Clearly the meaning of slave writing did not inhere exclusively in the text of a narrative alone. Meaning flowed into and out of a narrative in a series of acts of power. The primary abolitionists respected language as an instrument of power, to be used with care to influence human behavior. As sponsors they saw themselves as guardians of the common weal; authors they viewed as molders of civic morality; and readers, as corrigible citizens. All are necessary agents in the reformation of America. All are actors in the impending drama of reformation. At issue is the action, not the writing that induced it.

Because the spoken word was regarded as a more flexible instrument of power than the written, antislavery societies of course favored lecturers over writers. An audience could be moved more easily when an encounter was face-to-face, when it could participate through questions and comments, when the words of the message could be revised, elaborated, returned. Written narratives were needed to repeat the message and to reach across the Atlantic and into regions lecturers might not visit. The editor of the first edition of Josiah Henson's narrative (1849) said just this in his "advertisement" to the book:

The narrative in this form, necessarily loses the attraction derived from the earnest manner, the natural eloquence of a man who tells a story in which he is deeply interested; but it is hoped that enough remains to repay perusals, and that the character of the man, and the striking nature of the events of his life will be thought to justify the endeavor to make them more extensively known.

To be persuasive, to possess the plenitude of a gifted speaker, a written narrative had to be pretested, its frozen text defrosted. Abolitionist questions prepared a black speaker/author for the wishes of his audience and helped to order the story he would tell. With experience he would incorporate the questions of his audience – modifying as needed for a group more or less informed, more or less hostile. Douglass relates the large numbers who returned more than once – to hear again, for example, his clashes with Covey or with Auld – who came to be informed and returned to be moved. Like the other black agents, Douglass learned well what interrogators and audiences alike came to expect. One of the most widely recognized books ever published by the movement was *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, printed by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839. Its compilers, Theodore and Angelina Weld, culled southern newspapers of 1837–39 for a documentary record, in southern words, of the punishments inflicted by slaveowners. Its 224 pages were densely packed and double-columned, organized by visitors' accounts and such headings as:

Iron collars, chains, fetters, and hand-cuffs  
 Iron head-frame  
 Chain coffles  
 Brandings, maimings, and gun-shot wounds  
 Slaves burned alive  
 Slaves roasted and flogged  
 Slave driven to death  
 Female slave whipped to death, and during the torture delivered  
 of a dead infant.  
 . . . Slave chopped piece-meal, and burnt.

When white editors like Weld were criticized as horror-hunting and sensation-seeking, they replied that southerners themselves retailed atrocity stories and that slavery was innately horrible. "Abolitionists exaggerate the horrors of slavery? Impossible! They have never conceived half its horrors!" was Garrison's response. Without denying the abolitionist penchant for tales of "romantic horror," one can say they were not being disingenuous. White interest was intense in the mysteries and the

barbarities of slavery, and it continued after Emancipation – in the questions asked by the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission in 1863 and again by the WPA interviewers in 1936–38.<sup>21</sup> What distinguishes the abolitionist effort – no doubt setting a durable pattern – is the attempt to evoke a structured exposition of slavery within the form of the life story. Questioning former slaves, interviewers consistently wanted to know: the circumstances of birth and family, the character of the slaveowner’s household and regimen, and the reason for escape and its means. Particularly they sought the names, dates, places of the slave’s family, the owner’s family, cruel overseers and resisting slaves, brutal punishments and harsh suppression of the will to read and write, the depth of Christianity in the owner’s household, the kinds and amount of labor demanded and of food supplied, the effect of slavery on the subject and the subject’s family, plans and attempts to escape, final flight, and a brief account of life since the escape – one emphasizing communication with antislavery groups.

It is no revelation that these are the topics around which most of the narratives of the period are structured. Answers become episodes, and episodes become chapters. Wendell Phillips had said that the unconcern and insensibility of white northerners should never be underestimated. These factors principal abolitionist sponsors kept always before them. Slave stories would have to be told, retold, and told again. To the second edition of his narrative (1846), Lewis Clarke appended a partial list of the questions he was incessantly asked. While the antislavery movement had been growing for nearly a generation, Lewis continues to answer questions about elemental black humanity: How do slaves spend the Sabbath? What if strangers come along and see you at work? Why did you not learn to read? How many slaves have you ever known that could read? Are families often separated? What amount of food do slaves have? What is the clothing of a slave for a year? Don’t slaves often say that they love their masters very much? Don’t slaves who run away return sometimes? Do slaves have conscientious scruples about taking things from their masters? Do you think it was right for you to run away and not pay anything for yourself?

Notably absent from this list and others is any special inquiry into a slave’s life after slavery. Clarke’s presence on the abolitionist platform of course supplies a physical answer, but hardly a conclusive one. Yet antislavery language does assume absorption, a new life; in the narrative it is antislavery as a form that provides closure. Compare the scene with which Douglass closed his narrative, cited earlier, with the final paragraph in William Wells Brown:

In the autumn, 1843, impressed with the importance of spreading anti-slavery truth, as a means to bring about the abolition of slavers, I commenced lecturing as an agent of the western New York Anti-Slavery Society, and have ever since devoted my time to the cause of my enslaved countrymen.<sup>22</sup>

The beginnings and endings of slaves’ lives are thus institutionally bound. Put another way, the slave is witness in a double sense: eyewitness to a system that must be exposed, and witness called before abolitionist judges and jurors to reply to specific questions – no more, no less. Once again, white sponsors compel a black author to approve, to authorize white institutional power. The black message will be sealed within a white envelope.

## III

Words – so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become, in the hands of one who knows how to combine them.

– Nathaniel Hawthorne

Let there be, then, in these United States, a Printing Press, a copious supply of type, a full and complete establishment, wholly controlled by colored men; let the thinking writing-man, the compositors, pressman, printers' help, all, all be men of color; – then let there come from said establishment a weekly periodical and a quarterly periodical, edited as well as printed by colored men; – let this establishment be so well endowed as to be beyond the chances of temporary patronage; and then there will be a fixed fact, a rallying point, towards which the strong and the weak amongst us would look with confidence and hope; from which would flow a steady stream of comfort and exhortation to the weary strugglers, and burning rebuke and overwhelming argument upon those who dare impede our way.

– Resolution of National Negro Convention, 1847

In the narrative of Briton Hammon, both slavery and Hammon's unique responses to it are marginal to the story of captivity and religious conversion. The publication of Hammon's narrative is also marginal to the main business of American printing. In the narrative of William Wells Brown eighty-seven years later, the personal identity of the former slave is marginal to an exposure of slavery. His written narrative is likewise regarded at the time as no more than an adjunct to his primary work as an antislavery lecturer. The history of the slave narrative reveals a curious movement of centers and margins. What remains ever at the center is an institutional form or experience. What is meanwhile pushed to the periphery is the unique and distinctive experience of an individual life.

Like medieval painters, Freud has taught us to look to the margins for the nuclear, illuminating detail. Following Freud, structural anthropologists look to the margins for meaning and significance.<sup>23</sup> In both instances, meaning is discovered where it is hidden, excluded, repressed, taboo. What is written off is found to be written from. White Americans, it would seem, have long attempted to cloak the raw experience of slavery, in the eighteenth century subordinating it to the language of triumphal American Christianity, for most of the nineteenth transmuting it into the language of abolition. For the seventy years between 1870 and 1940, even this genteel transmutation was too raw, too threatening. Again there is an apparent constant. White sponsors of slave lives strive to see such lives wholly within the history of white institu-

tions, for such a history is safe and comprehensible to editors and readers alike. Most white sponsors of slave narratives from 1760 to 1865 seem to have believed that all important aspects of a slave life could be told by recounting what was done to him or her. White power over black lives was so great, so disproportionately great that the slave was recipient/victim – at most re-actor. Under the heading of “Slave Narrative,” antislavery periodicals frequently reprinted portions of Weld’s *American Slavery As It Is*; particularly favored was the story of slaveholders for sport tying several large cats about the neck of a bound slave, then goading the animals until they scratched and clawed the slave to death. This self-absorbed psychology was embodied in the language of abolition as a whole. Because abolitionists did not think beyond white institutional categories, they could not reason without reasoning falsely. Before returning to the questions of literary history raised by the narratives, I should like to identify some of those larger categories. The reasoning they induced certainly affected far more than antebellum narratives and just as certainly lasted far longer than did the combat over emancipation.

In one of the most valuable studies of the desegregation crisis of the 1960s, *The Politics of School Desegregation* (1968), Robert L. Crain and others investigated the ways decisions over school desegregation had been made in fifteen large urban school districts. They found remarkable diversity among the school boards: elected and appointed, united and divided, reformist and corrupt, highly political and non-partisan, sympathetic to desegregation and adamantly hostile. Yet on one major issue they found striking agreement: the problems of desegregation would be handled by white people talking to white people. Some board members thought of themselves as “new abolitionists,” but none showed any respect for the opinions of black parents or organizations. Although desegregation was the most critical decision to arise during the tenure of any board, all chose to handle the decision in the same way that they selected new textbooks – by appeasing all “power centers.” Because blacks did not represent such a center, they were ignored. Also ignored in the process were the goals of integrated education and the desires of black students and parents. Desegregation became an end in and of itself.

Little historical imagination is required to realize that many important decisions affecting black Americans have been made by white people talking to white people. There is more than a little mordant, though unintended, irony in the allusion in 1965 to the goals of abolition. For neither Garrison nor Phillips was normally concerned with black goals. Garrison said his ultimate intention was not to end slavery but to compel men to do their duty, and Phillips announced proudly, “If we never free a slave, we have at least freed ourselves in the effort to emancipate our brother man.”<sup>24</sup> Their efforts to free themselves had two consequences. On the one hand, even before they translated the goal of abolition to mean repentance by white America for the sin of slavery, they were in essence ignoring black demands – literary, economic, or political. They would remain moral purists: white saints exhorting white sinners to give over white sin. On the other, their proslavery opponents did on occasion force them down from the empyrean of abstract ideas into the forum of politics and power. Here again they could, with impunity, be antislavery without being advocates of black values. Because they were nation-builders forced to articulate (at least nega-

tively) a vision beyond abolition, they took seriously the charges that antislavery agitation would unleash social anarchy. One slave insurrection or one workers' riot was sufficient proof, it was alleged, that laborers might rebel at any time. Because of such charges, most abolitionists worked tirelessly to disassociate themselves from social and economic radicalism.

Proslavery riots of the early 1830s convinced abolition leaders to be prudent. In 1834 the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society guaranteed the mayor of New York City that its activities would do nothing toward "exciting the people of color to assume airs, etc.," a promise reiterated in 1836 as a disclaimer against "certain things which are confounded with abolitionism; such as social intercourse, amalgamation, etc."<sup>25</sup> After emancipation blacks would be as "kind and docile" as they were now, for as a race they were characterized by "their susceptibility to control." The normal argument is voiced by the sympathetic abolitionist in Richard Hildreth's *Archy Moore* (1836).

It is paying a very poor compliment, indeed, to the courage and superiority of us whites to doubt whether we, superior in numbers as in every thing else, could not inspire awe enough to maintain our natural position at the head of the community, and to keep these poor people in order without making slaves of them.<sup>26</sup>

While black abolitionists were arguing that the freedoms of all Americans were limited so long as blacks were restrained, their white counterparts sought to draw the bounds of freedom in smaller compass. Even the most ardent of the Garrisonians was careful to distinguish between emancipation and social equality.<sup>27</sup> They distinguished, moreover, between literary opportunity and literary equality. On a personal level, white leaders at one time or another criticized virtually all black writers and lecturers. If a black abolitionist seemed to covet status or possessions or independence, then he was accused of self-interest or treachery. The vehement division between Douglass and Garrison is well known, yet there were countless others. Samuel May, Jr., for instance, wrote to a British friend when Wells Brown sailed for England:

He is a very good fellow, of very fair abilities, and has been quite true to the cause. But he likes to make popular and taking speeches, and keeps a careful eye upon his own benefit. The Anti-Slavery cause has been everything to him, in point of elevating and educating him; and giving him a respectable position, etc. He owes much to it and he ought to be true to it.<sup>28</sup>

Brown at this time considered May a close friend. The latter admits no cause for grievance, unless it is the very success of Brown's speeches — precisely what the abolitionists wished from him. Yet May remains suspicious lest Brown forget that he owes his "elevation," his existence to his white sponsors. Some version of this warning preceded most black abolitionists traveling to Europe.

In retrospect, May's attitude toward Brown can be seen as characteristic of abolitionist ambivalence. Over a generation white antislavery advocates had been forced

by circumstance to deny that abolition was a radical threat. Implicitly they denied that freedmen might possess values different from theirs; practically they denied that freedmen might possess a significant degree of independence. Just as the interrogation technique had been intended by early editors merely to resolve an immediate, practical problem, so too their early political compromises had far-reaching implications.

"Give us the facts . . . we will take care of the philosophy. . . ." The mechanics of Douglass's dilemma are sufficiently clear. He was confronted by a battery of white questions about life under slavery and by the mandated forms under which his answers would be subsumed. What remains to be explained is why white sponsors, having determined the facts to be conveyed, felt obliged also to supply their conceptual frame. We have already seen the influence of eighteenth-century narratives. Yet when slavery had been moved to the foreground of debate, why cannot former slaves themselves be entrusted with the philosophy of their own stories?

The American press took text and comfort from earlier British opposition to the slave trade. Quoted with regularity were Wesley, Priestley, Blake, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Campbell, and especially Cowper. From these and other British literary figures, Americans inherited two alternative images of the slave: the noble savage and the child of western civilization. The former image — of a people sensitive and courageous in their native land — was of obvious value to proponents of colonization. But it had little direct appeal to most American abolitionists. For them the more advantageous metaphor was of a people who, through no fault of their own, had remained mired in a rude state of nature and had not yet begun the general ascent of humankind toward enlightenment. Blacks were more than ready to profit from western education, according to Coleridge, because they were "more versatile, more easily modified, than perhaps any other known race."<sup>29</sup> Malleability, receptivity to education and control were notions the American movement found serviceable during the three decades before the war. *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1836), by Lydia Maria Child, editor of Harriet Jacobs's narrative and author of many abolitionist tracts, carried an epigraph from Coleridge and dozens of quotations from the English in an effort "to prove that the present degraded condition of that unfortunate race is produced by artificial causes, not by the laws of nature" (148). Chapter VI, "Intellect of Negroes," is a survey — based upon principles upon which "naturalists are universally agreed" — of black culture from the ancient world to the present. Black authors are credited with the gifts of the *naif*; Equiano's *Narrative* "is said to be written with all the simplicity, and something of the roughness, of uneducated nature" (160). From this condition, Mrs. Child deduces:

I am well aware that most of the negro authors are remarkable principally because they are negroes. With considerable talent, they generally evince bad taste. I do not pretend that they are Scotts or Miltons; but I wish to prove that they are *men*, capable of producing their proportion of Scotts and Miltons, if they could be allowed to live in a state of physical and intellectual freedom. But where, at the present time, *can* they live in perfect freedom, cheered by the hopes and excited by the rewards, which stimulate white men to exertion? Every avenue to distinction is closed to them. Even where the body is suffered to be free,

a hateful prejudice keeps the soul in fetters. I think every candid mind must admit that it is more wonderful they have done so much, than that they have done no more. (171)

Blacks will not produce Scotts and Miltons so long as they remain the ignorant children of the West: "A family of children treated with habitual violence or contempt, become stupid and sluggish, and are called fools by the very parents or guardians who have crushed their mental energies" (171).

Mrs. Child does not say whether white America has produced its Scotts and Miltons, but she is certain blacks will prosper to the degree that they follow the directions of sympathetic teachers like herself. At this point she joins hands with the editors of *Hammon*, *Gronniosaw*, *White*, and even *Pomp*. For childhood, in evolutionary terms, entails a very long period of apprenticeship to the white heads of the family. James Freeman Clarke gave the definitive pronouncement of the 1840s when, in a sermon, he extolled black ability to follow the lead of their betters:

The colored man has not so much invention as the white, but more imitation. He has not so much of the reflective, but more of the perceptive powers. . . . The blacks have not the indomitable perseverance and will, which make the Caucasian, at least the Saxon portion of it, *masters* wherever they go — .<sup>30</sup>

Like Clarke, Moncure Conway withholds as much credit as he dispenses. Because of their poetic, fertile imaginations, Conway wrote, black artists are likely after slavery to contribute to the nation's art and music, particularly through a "fervid African element, so child-like, exuberant, and hopeful." As Emancipation approached, Theodore Tilton summarized for the American Anti-Slavery Society the judgments of earlier writers upon black abilities. Approving Mrs. Child, Clarke, and Conway, he chose a different metaphor for his conclusion: "The negro race is the feminine race of the world."<sup>31</sup>

From the beginning of the abolitionist period, the sponsors of slave narratives relied upon the putative effects of slavery to justify whatever position was at that moment called for—from solicitude to negligence, patronage to condescension.<sup>32</sup> Current black demands and specific black achievements seem to have influenced those positions not at all. Phillips, Child, Clarke, Conway, and Tilton were among the most acute of the abolitionists, and they directed their strictures toward the most prominent of black spokesmen. Two things are clear. While arguing that black cultural expression would in due course join white expression in a national culture, they were also separating it, setting it aside indefinitely. Further, black aspirations would need white guidance even after emancipation, even in generations born in freedom.

The assumption of cultural hegemony persisting long after the war was encouraged by Louis Agassiz, professor at Harvard and the most eminent natural scientist in America. Although not an abolitionist, he was close to several leaders of the movement and was the academic authority to whom they often turned. He was recommended to the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission in 1863 when that body sought testimony on black enfranchisement. His advice was of a piece with earlier white doubts.

I cannot think it just or safe to grant at once to the negro all the privileges which we ourselves have acquired by long struggles. . . . Let us beware of granting too much to the negro race in the beginning, lest it become necessary hereafter to deprive them of some of the privileges which they may use to their own and our detriment.<sup>33</sup>

On the safety of literary hegemony, Garrison is a consistent proponent, after the war as well as before. In private correspondence his terms of praise for a white author are "magnificent," "powerful," and the like. When he describes the work of a black author, however, his recognition is limited to "useful," "agreeable," or "making a very favorable impression."<sup>34</sup> His abiding question is, how will a white audience respond?

For more than thirty arduous years Garrison worked at close hand with dozens of fugitives and freemen. Yet his voluminous correspondence is as silent in personal understanding of his black assistants as it is effusive about his white. In his dealings with Douglass and Brown, he required black leaders to be strong enough to control their followers, yet sufficiently weak not to challenge *him*. In his correspondence he treats black writers as though they exist in some distinct, segregated limbo, hardly in touch with the white world. On 30 July 1868 he writes to Tilton concerning a petition proposed by Horace Greeley:

Mr. Greeley suggests getting the names of "at least fifty leading, life-long Abolitionists" to the desired document. In the present divided state of feeling, I doubt whether half that number could be obtained of those who are well known to the country. Neither Phillips, nor Pillsbury, nor Foster, nor Whipple, nor any who affiliate with them, would join in any such movement. Probably Gerrit Smith, Samuel J. May, Samuel May, Jr., Samuel E. Sewall, and Edmund Quincy would sign the paper. Some colored names ought to be added — such as Douglass, Garnet, Nell, Wells Brown, Langston, &c, &c. Perhaps these had better send an appeal of their own. Of course, Purvis and Remond would have nothing to do with the matter.<sup>35</sup>

Structurally similar to several earlier ones, this letter separates his antislavery colleagues into white and black sentences, with the black names appended ("colored names ought to be added") as an afterthought. While most white figures are identified by full names, even initials, the blacks are referred to as examples ("such as"), by last names only, followed by a sign that Garrison will not try to be exhaustive ("etc, etc").

By way of explanation, he continues: "There are so few of the freedmen who, in the nature of things, can know anything of the Abolitionists, that I am not quite sure it would amount to much if any number of names were appended to the paper proposed." This is one of the most startling sentences, public or private, Garrison ever penned. The specific nature of Greeley's petition is unknown; Garrison's editors guess that it concerned amnesty or suffrage. In any case, Garrison is referring to black leaders who have known him for more than a generation, who were antislavery authors, lecturers, and international representatives. They include men who have been speaking and writing at length over many years about white abolitionists and the

cause; Brown alone delivered an estimated 2,000 lectures. They too called themselves Abolitionists, though now he would withhold the title. What is the mysterious “nature of things” that allows knowledge to flow but one way, to whites but not to blacks? His lament may be that the influence of freedmen, even of those of Douglass’s stature, would not amount to much. Yet the ignorance he finds may be his own. His final words on the subject reflect a familiar gambit – using the threat of southern retaliation to suppress black voices: “Moreover, might not such names exasperate the rebel enemies of the freedmen, and stimulate them to the infliction of fresh outrages? It is worth considering whether a calm and simple statement *per se*, as to what is the political duty of the freedmen in the coming struggle, will not be sufficient.” Like Agassiz, Garrison seems preoccupied with the potential for “our detriment.” In earlier campaigns black voices were considered an essential chorus; now they are not. (Calm and simple statements *per se*, it should be remembered, are the *raison d’être* of the slave narrators.) What Garrison prefers is an unequivocal announcement of white hegemony: a statement drafted by men like himself to direct freedmen to their political duty. Blacks are not needed to frame the language of such a statement, merely to fulfill it. The dilemma faced by Douglass and other slave narrators is clearer. Garrison would have important decisions made by white people talking to white people.

*Does the slave narrative represent a distinct literary genre?* Certainly. It is a highly mixed genre, but no more so than other genres. It possesses a demonstrable, relatively continuous history, as apparent to observers after 1800 as it is to us today. But it is not an Afro-American genre.

*Is it a version of autobiography?* This is a problematic question, to which most others are connected. To answer it, one must recall current conceptions of autobiography. Traditionalists and post-structuralists agree that autobiography comes into being when recollection engages memory. Recollection engages people, things, events seemingly fragmented and unrelated; as an essential part of its activity, recollection brings sequence and/or relation to the enormous diversity of experience; it plots the stages of the subject’s journey to selfhood. Meaning emerges when events are connected as parts of a coherent and comprehensive whole. Meaning, relation, and wholeness are but three facets of one characteristic: a narrative self that is more a literary creation than a pre-existing, literal fact. The self of autobiography comes into being in the act of writing, not before.<sup>36</sup> This much said, the contrast with the antebellum slave narrative should be apparent. From *Adam Negro’s Tryall* or the *Narrative* of Briton Hammon to the *Incidents* of Harriet Jacobs in 1861, the stated purpose of the slave narrative is far different from the creation of a self, and the overarching shape of that story is mandated by persons other than the subject. Not black recollection, but white interrogation brings order to the narration. For eighteenth-century narratives the self that emerges is a pre-existing form, deriving largely from evangelical Christianity. For the abolitionist period, the self is a type of the antislavery witness. In each instance the meaning, relation, and wholeness of the story are given before the narrative begins; they are imposed rather than chosen – what Douglass calls “the facts which I felt almost everybody must know.”

Without descending into otherwise important distinctions between, say, British and American versions, first and later editions, dictated and subject-composed narratives,

those sponsored by abolitionists and those not, one can offer a tentative conclusion. When Georges Gusdorf calls eighteenth-century autobiographies "theodicies of the individual," he is referring to Rousseau and Boswell, not to Marrant or Gronniosaw.<sup>37</sup> So far are the latter from worshipping selfhood and individuality, these traits are deliberately suppressed. One might say that the genre as a whole is defined by a suppression of the personal slave voice. For most sponsors, by stipulation, defined the slave as primitive and then proceeded to use the narratives to address other white people. Foucault's language of Otherness applies here. The *voice* of the narratives is a white voice. For Methodists or abolitionists to express their dominance, the slave must remain silent. In this sense the introductory letters can be seen as *causal* to the narratives they precede. The slave is the primitive other whose silence allows white sponsors to describe the grace, the beauty of their own civilized voices. Silence, the suppression of selfhood, is a necessary condition of being in the slave narrative. The separately published narratives are thus not a subspecies of autobiography.

*What are the distinguishing characteristics of the genre?* It is, first, an Anglo-American form in which the life story of a present or former slave is related by himself. Second, it is published when to do so would suit the purposes of a white group or institution, a lesson Booker T. Washington learned well. And third, it is a form used by many writers to subvert white literary and institutional values. Fully to argue this third point would require a separate essay. Suffice it to say that such a case has already been made in other terms by several critics.<sup>38</sup> The institutional purposes were present from 1703 and 1760 and continued until 1865. Changes in those purposes brought about changes in emphasis within the genre, with the antislavery movement prompting the major shift in emphasis. Throughout the period, however, the narrative remained a popular literary form. By popular narrative I understand a vivid, impelling story possessing a singleness of motive in its characters and a singleness of interpretation for its readers. In the hands of many slave narrators, such straight-line stories are rich in texture, for they offer in passing ample chance for social criticism.<sup>39</sup>

*What is at stake in this analysis?* To the extent that readers remain alert to literary kinds, periods, and influences, a comprehension of the historical conditions of the slave narrative will remain decisive for an understanding of Afro-American writing. At present one can find studies praising or blaming the form for a bewildering, even contradictory, variety of qualities: for formula and incoherence, for powerful realism and dripping sentimentality, for rich diversity and boring sameness, for intricate originality and flat imitation, for innovative autobiography and sterile melodrama. Without denying the contributions of such studies, one can argue that they are largely beside the point. They assume too much (or too little) about the elemental nature of the genre and who possessed it. For in American writing the slave narrative is unique; it resembles other forms, but other forms do not resemble it.

A new literary history will disentangle the genre *as genre* from later Afro-American writing. It will disclose in detail that the narrative *contains* the beginnings of a distinct tradition but is not identical to such beginnings. It will perform the same function with the charge of cultural primitivism. The narrative as a form and primitivism as an enveloping judgment were invented at the same time, by the same people, for similar reasons. The invention was of *lives*. Life stories were the patent for the invention. In

the words of the Preface to John Marrant in 1785: "The following Narrative is as plain and artless, as it is surprising and extraordinary. Plausible reasonings may amuse and delight, but facts, and facts like these, strike, are felt, and go home to the heart." If the lives of such persons as Hammon, Marrant, White, Brown, Henson, Jacobs, and Northup are plain, artless, factual, and without plausible reasonings, then what of the unnamed mass of black persons under slavery? If the named and vocal have no voices, what is left to the unnamed? What is more silent than silence? In literary condescension begins cultural dominance and political hegemony.

A new literary history will jettison the preemptive metaphor of the black author as literary child. That metaphor was in force early in the eighteenth century, long before its use by Jefferson, Coleridge, Child, Conway, Tilton, Price, Garrison, and Agassiz. It served its users long, if not well. Its persistence explains why the narratives were ignored for more than seventy years and perhaps why it was translated into the literary critical judgments of Moses Coit Tyler, Vernon Loggins, Robert Spiller, and many others. For a contemporary example, Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, three influential critics, in their influential anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, relegate the work of Douglass and other early Afro-American writers to an appendage entitled "Literature of the Nonliterary World." Even for 1973 a great writer like Douglass remains too primitive to be literary.<sup>40</sup> What is at stake as a minimum in this analysis is the life, the being of Afro-American authors.

A new literary history will recognize that the silence of the slave narrative was partial and temporary, of its time and not of ours. An Anglo-American genre may claim black authors but not black authority. Nevertheless, a genre overarching 150 years and 100 works can be totalizing without being total. Each narrative is itself a multiply-layered network of relations, containing within the network varieties of diction, rhetoric, and syntax which it shares with other forms of discourse, and which it orders for a particular effect. Historically the narrative as a form was too large, too formidable to be colonized in its entirety. Future literary history will engage the form – individually and collectively – on one or more of the following levels. It will first read the narrative "as is," using traditional methods to illuminate for example the nuances of difference in form between white- and black-sponsored stories (like those in the *North Star*), between religious and abolitionist groups and among the latter, between stories of the 1840s and those of the 1850s. Next it will attend more closely to recurrent topoi that modify the symbolic order of the narrative. Folk elements, superstitions, plays upon names and naming, images of exile and confinement and defilement all have the effect of disturbing the conservative form of the narrative without displacing it. Many writers were aware that they were retelling in their own lives the Christian myth of the crucifixion within the national crisis of human slavery; they were not humbled by the prospect. Finally, literary history will engage in radical strategies to hear the silence of the narratives. It will attend to the gaps, the elisions, the contradictions, and especially the violations. It will turn original purposes on an angle, transform objects into subjects, and abolish the abolitionists. The slave narrators were feeling their way through strange fields in the dark, Arna Bontemps once wrote. When they found light or a break in the fences, they ran on. Abolitionist nar-

ratives, for one large instance, are critiques of certain aspects of America. A subgroup of those, in turn, are critiques of critiques. Future studies will find better ways to distinguish message from envelope and will give more prominent place to the “fraudulent” narratives, like those of Charles Ball and James Williams, that invent as well as imitate and criticize.

New literary history will not minimize the cultural loss inherent in the creation of the slave narratives. Nor will it deny the cultural gain. Authority was indeed lost, yet authenticity was certainly gained. In moral terms the slave narrative and its heirs are the only history of American slavery we have. Outside the narrative, slavery for black Americans was a wordless, nameless, timeless time. It was time without history and time without imminence. Existence was reduced largely to the duration of the psychological present. Or at least, according to Peter Walker, this was the only sense of time slaveholders would tolerate. For slaveholders the only reliable texts were their own records; the only valid recollection, from their own memories.<sup>41</sup> Whatever else may be said about it, the slave narrative changed that forever. It gave some means and measure of fixity in a life of flux, and in this sense to recall one’s history is to renew it. The slave narrative as written life story encouraged a recollection that could be tested, corrected, replenished. Such recollection could then be united with other life stories to form a history, a time beyond personal memory, a time beyond slaveholders’ power. The narrative is both instrument and inscription of a collective memory. In 1849 Pennington put the case in an apology for his narrative:

Whatever may be the ill or favored condition of the slave in the matter of mere personal treatment, it is the chattel relation that robs him of his manhood, and transfers his ownership in himself to another. . . . It is this that throws his family history into utter confusion, and leaves him without a single record to which he may appeal in vindication of his character, or honor. And has a man no sense of honor because he was born a slave? Has he no need of character? Suppose insult, reproach, or slander, should render it necessary for him to appeal to the history of his family in vindication of his character, where does he find that history? He goes to his native state, to his native county, to his native town; but nowhere does he find any record of himself *as a man*.<sup>42</sup>

Nameless, merely numbered, in their native land, Pennington and his family find honor as well as being in the pages of *The Fugitive Blacksmith*. For him and for us those pages are no small gift.

#### Notes

1. Phillips’s views may be sampled in *American Negro Slavery* (1918) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929). His influence is estimated in Richard Hofstadter, “U. B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend,” *Journal of Negro History* 29 (April 1944): 109–24. Overarching Phillips’s specific studies was a general “scholarly” dismissal of black contributions (and potential contributions) to American history. See F. L. Hoffman, *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (1896); William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic* (1907); H. Paul Douglas, *Christian Reconstruction*

- in the South (1909); Howard W. Odum, *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* (1910); Wallace Knight, *The Influence of Reconstruction on Education in the South* (1913); David Starr Jordan, *War's Aftermath: A Preliminary Study of the Eugenics of War* (1914); and C. C. Brigham, *A Study of American Intelligence* (1923).
2. Among DuBois's many relevant publications are *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). For Woodson, see *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (1915), *The Negro in Our History* (1922), and *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933); he was of course the founder of *The Journal of Negro History*. For Johnson, see especially *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934).
  3. John W. Blassingame surveys the types of narratives and the arguments for authenticity in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (rev. ed., New York: Oxford UP, 1979) and his Introduction to *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977). For a fuller view of the debate, see John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20 (July 1935): 294-337; Benjamin A. Botkin, "The Slave as His Own Interpreter," *Library of Congress Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions* 2 (November 1944): 37-63; Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19 (1967): 534-53; William W. Nichols, "Slave Narratives: Dismissed Evidence in the Writing of Southern History," *Phylon* 32 (Winter 1971): 403-09; C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," *American Historical Review* 79 (April 1974): 470-81; Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (November 1975): 473-92; Randall M. Miller, "When Lions Write History: Slave Testimony and the History of American Slavery," *Research Studies* 44 (March 1976): 13-23; and David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery," *Journal of Southern History* 46 (August 1980): 381-404. To see how modern editors have judged and used the narratives, see the Introductions in Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin' on Ole Massa* (1969); Arna Bontemps, ed., *Great Slave Narratives* (1969); Bokin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (1945); Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery* (1970); and George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972), which is the introductory volume to the nineteen volumes of WPA and Fisk narratives.
  4. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 30-31.
  5. Martha K. Cobb, "The Slave Narrative and the Black Literary Tradition," *The Art of Slave Narrative*, ed. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (Macomb, IL: *Essays in Literature* Books, 1982) 38.
  6. For the desire of owners to control the fabric of slave life, see A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process - The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978). Owners' self-conferred titles are mentioned in at least seventeen narratives, spies sent into the fields in at least eleven.
  7. See Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981) 50-52. The *Tryall* was published in *Publications of the Colonial Society: Transactions, 1892-1894*, 103-12.
  8. William L. Andrews, "The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative, 1760-1810," *The Art of Slave Narrative*, ed. Sekora and Turner, 19-22. I am much indebted to Andrews's excellent essay. See also David Minter, "Concepts of the Self in Black Slave Narratives," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 24 (1974): 62-68.
  9. See Richard Slotkin, "Narratives of Negro Crime in New England, 1675-1800," *American Quarterly* 25 (March 1973): 3-31; and Andrews, "First Fifty Years," 7, 10-11.
  10. Andrews, 18.
  11. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1845; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1982) 151.
  12. For the following discussion, I have drawn upon Alice D. Adams, *The Neglected Period of Anti-Slavery in America, 1808-1831* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1908); William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974); Martin Duberman, ed., *The Anti-Slavery Vanguard* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965); Benjamin Quarles, *The Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969); Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolition: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1830-1844* (New York: Pantheon, 1969); and Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery 1830-1860* (New York: Harper, 1960). Among many valuable articles, see Larry Gara, "The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 48:3 (Spring 1965): 196-204. A useful dissertation is Robert C. Dick, "Rhetoric of the Ante-Bellum Protest Movement" (Stanford, 1969).
  13. For convenient listings, see John W. Blassingame and Mae G. Henderson, *Antislavery Newspapers*

- and *Periodicals 1817–1854*, 3 vols. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980–81); and George E. Carter and C. Peter Ripley, *Black Abolitionist Papers* (Sanford, NC: Microfilm Corporation of America, 1981).
14. C. Duncan Rice, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 313.
  15. John A. Collins to Garrison, quoted in the *Liberator*, 21 January 1842.
  16. Chicago *Western Citizen* for December 1847: quoted by Gara, "Professional Fugitive," 201.
  17. Angelina Grimké to Theodore Weld, 21 January 1838: quoted by Gara, 197. Grimké too uses the singular "tale."
  18. Quoted by Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1950, 1975): I, 55.
  19. *Christian Examiner* 47 (July 1849): 64.
  20. Quoted by Starling, 107.
  21. See Benjamin A. Botkin, "The Slave as His Own Interpreter," esp. 38–43. To draw the contrast between pro- and antislavery narratives, see the memoirs of Isaac Jefferson dictated to Charles Campbell in the 1840s and published in 1951 as *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave*, ed. Benjamin Quarles.
  22. *The Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, ed. Larry Gara (1847; rpt. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969) 49.
  23. For instance, Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols Are Connected* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1976).
  24. Quoted by Pease and Pease, *They Who Would Be Free*, 11. For discussion of abolitionist attitudes, I have drawn upon several biographical studies: John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963); Russel B. Nye, *William Lloyd Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955); Betty Fladeland, *James Gillespie Birney: Slaveholder to Abolitionist* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1955); Ralph V. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith, Philanthropist and Reformer* (New York: Holt, 1939); Benjamin Thomas, *Theodore Weld, Crusader for Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1950); Irving H. Bartlett, *Wendell Phillips, Brahmin Radical* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); and Frank P. Stearns, *The Life and Public Services of George Luther Stearns* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1907). Works necessary to evaluate the abolitionist legacy are Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1961); George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Leon F. Litwack, "The Abolitionist Dilemma: The Antislavery Movement and the Northern Negro," *New England Quarterly* 34 (1961): 50–73; Litwack, *North of Slavery* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961); Pease and Pease, "Antislavery Ambivalence," *American Quarterly* 17 (1965): 682–95, and "Boston Garrisonians and the Problem of Frederick Douglass," *Canadian Journal of History* 2 (September 1967): 27–48; and especially James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964).
  25. Quoted by Pease and Pease, *They Who Would Be Free*, 607.
  26. Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore* (1836; rpt. New York, 1856) 264.
  27. See Douglass's editorial on the subject in *Douglass's Monthly* for October 1860. Significant studies are Pease and Pease, "Antislavery Ambivalence," esp. 684; and Frederickson, *The Black Image*, 40 and passim.
  28. May to Joseph Estlin, 21 May 1849: quoted in Gara, "Professional Fugitive," 203. For Douglass, see Quarles, "The Break Between Douglass and Garrison," *Journal of Negro History* 23 (April 1938): 144–54; and Douglass's letter to Maria Weston Chapman, 29 March 1846, in Foner I, 142–44.
  29. Coleridge and other figures are quoted in Richard M. Kain, "The Problem of Civilization in English Abolitionist Literature, 1772–1808," *PQ* 15 (April 1936): 103–25. For further background see Wole Soyinka's Preface to his *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976); and Charles H. Long, "Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem," *History of Religions* 20 (August and November 1980): 43–61.
  30. James Freeman Clarke, *Slavery in the United States: A Sermon Delivered on Thanksgiving Day 1842* (Boston 1843) 24. For later statements of the principle, see Child, *The Right Way The Safe Way* (1860), and Lewis Tappan, *Immediate Emancipation: The Only Wise and Safe Mode* (1861). For a gloss on the debate, see James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964), esp. 134–53.
  31. Conway writes in the *Boston Commonwealth* for 18 October 1862; Tilton's address was published later in 1863 as *The Negro*. Both are quoted by McPherson, 144–45.
  32. Litwack, "The Abolitionists' Dilemma," esp. 61–65.
  33. Letter from Agassiz to Samuel Gridley Howe 10 August 1863: quoted by McPherson, 146.
  34. See, e.g., his letter to Elizabeth Pease 20 June 1849 in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, ed. Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1971–81): III 626, 637.

35. *Letters*, ed. Merrill and Ruchames, VI 77-78. James Olney makes excellent use of Garrison's prefatory letters to the narratives in a forthcoming essay, "I Was Born."
36. To select a range of examples, see James Olney's Introduction to *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 3-27; Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1971): 291-311; and Gerard Genette, "Time and Narrative in *A la recherche du temps perdu*," *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1971) 93-118.
37. See Gusdorf's essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," *Autobiography*, ed. Olney, 28-48.
38. To give a very partial listing: Baker, *The Journey Back*, and his essay on Equiano in the forthcoming *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*; Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979) 3-31; and four essays in *The Art of Slave Narrative*, ed. Sekora and Turner: Raymond Hedin, "Strategies of Form in the American Slave Narrative," 25-35; Lucinda H. MacKethan, "Metaphors of Mastery in the Slave Narratives," 55-69; Keith Byerman, "We Wear the Mask: Deceit as Theme and Style in Slave Narratives," 70-82; and Annette Niemtow, "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative," 96-109. See also Sterling A. Brown, "The Negro Author and His Publisher," *Quarterly Review of Higher Education Among Negroes* 9 (July 1941): 140-46; and Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," *Negro Digest* 6:6 (April 1950): 85-89.
39. I draw here from unpublished excerpts from the forthcoming study by Ralph Cohen of elite and popular forms in eighteenth-century England. See also Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: New York UP, 1978) 58-63; and Ronald Paulson, *Popular and Polite Art in the Age of Hogarth and Fielding* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1979) 24-48.
40. I am indebted to Houston Baker for this reference. To suggest the short distance between editors of twentieth-century anthologies and editors of nineteenth-century narratives, one could cite the preface to the *Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, A Fugitive from Slavery* (1847). Because of Black's "deficiency of education," an editor was needed for the book, "to fit it for the press." The editor devoted "himself mostly to punctuation, correcting the orthography, striking out unnecessary words and sentences, etc., etc." The critic as broker between editors is aptly represented by Vernon Loggins, whose *The Negro Author* (Columbia UP, 1931) is one of very few earlier literary studies to notice the narratives. While one commends the study for its attention, one must notice its terms. Of Marrant's narrative: "there is in the account a childlike instinct for sensing the marvelous and the wonderful which suggests strongly the primitive Negro imagination" (32). In Equiano there is "simplicity and artlessness," and "the Negro's mysticism, his unquestioning acceptance of the strange" (46, 43). The narrators are praised as a group for their "homely" or "homespun sentences"; William Whipper is successful because the "style is simple" (70); William Boen is faithful because of the "homeliness of the idiom" (95-96). Moses Roper is approved for his "homely English" (103). Douglass is approved because his style "is childlike in its simplicity" (141). Wells Brown's style "is all the more telling because of its simplicity" (161). When editors and critics have drawn the circle of primitivism around Afro-American expression, all that remains is a totalizing conclusion by a social scientist. The following is the judgment of Charles W. Dabney, for many years director of the Southern Education Board, in his two-volume *Universal Education in the South* (U of North Carolina P, 1936):

The first Negroes were brought out of African savagery and sold as slaves to the struggling pioneers in Virginia. Their masters were representatives of European civilization, the highest in the world at that time, while the Negroes as a whole belonged to a low order of savagery. The slaves from Africa were thus introduced into a state of law and order, of homes, of community life, and cooperative living instead of the wild life of the jungles. . . . Undoubtedly they were dealt a measure of injustice and cruelty, but in comparison with the African life from which they had just come, Virginia was a land of golden opportunity for the poor people, at least from the point of view of acquiring civilization. . . . In the history of the world there never was a savage people civilized, trained, and partially educated as rapidly as this people was in the space of two hundred years. (I, 433)

41. Peter F. Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1978) 230.
42. Bontemps, *Great Slave Narratives*, 201.