Introduction

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Frederick Douglass's antebellum reputation as a writer rests firmly on the autobiography he published when he was twenty-seven years old. At first glance, Douglass's incomparable literary success is inexplicable. During the two decades he spent as a Maryland slave, for example, Douglass displayed few of the talents that would mark his later literary career. Indeed, one observer who knew Douglass during the years he spent in bondage recalled that he was "an unlearned, and rather ordinary negro." However ordinary Douglass appeared as a slave, he had become an extraordinary man by 1845, seven years after his escape from bondage. If not yet learned, Douglass was at least highly literate by 1845.¹

In typical nineteenth-century fashion, Douglass was fond of referring to his autobiography in self-effacing terms. Speaking of his *Narrative* in 1845, for instance, he asserted that "a person undertaking to write a book without learning will appear rather novel, but such as it was I gave it to the public."² Like many authors, Douglass did not often reflect on or clearly elucidate the nature of his "learning" or the various literary influences bearing upon his writing. Nevertheless, it is obvious that when Douglass began writing his autobiography in the winter of 1844–45, he understood the conventions and literary canons that applied to the genre.³

The manifold influences bearing upon Douglass's autobiography included antebellum literary criticism, previously published black and white slave narratives, his knowledge of other autobiographical writings, and several events that took place between 1838 and 1845. Many of the conventions followed by Douglass were similar to those of other nineteenth-century American and English autobiographers, black and white. The similarities between black and white autobiographers were most evident in the narratives of those who had been enslaved or captured by Indians in the Americas or of white Europeans and Americans who were shipwrecked and enslaved in Africa.⁴

Because antebellum Americans frowned upon the reading of novels, they avidly read personal accounts of shipwrecks, slavery, and Indian captivities

that had all of the characteristics of romanticized adventures. Between 1682 and 1860, for instance, some Indian captivity narratives went through as many as forty-one editions. Among the earliest forms of American literature, these narratives expressed the religious sentiment of the age, employed biblical allusions extensively, exemplified the redemptive power of suffering, and illustrated divine providence. Authors stressed the didactic purposes served by their accounts. Frequently serialized in nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines, the narratives had become stylized, sentimental, melodramatic, and sensational tales containing exaggerated accounts of the barbarities, tortures, and manifold horrors suffered by the captives. Journalists fabricated many nineteenth-century accounts, and true stories had to compete with fiction parading as truth.⁵

Perhaps the clearest indication of the merging of black and white autobiographical traditions at an early point in American literary history is that some of the first black autobiographies were also, in part, Indian captivity narratives. Among the African American autobiographers to detail their captivity by and deliverance from Indians were Briton Hammon and John Marrant in *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760) and *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black, Taken Down from His Own Relation* (1785).

A group of powerful literary critics in the United States and the United Kingdom shaped the nineteenth-century autobiographical convention followed by Douglass and other authors. One of the most influential of these critics was an Englishman, the Reverend John Foster, a prolific and popular essayist. An ardent republican, Foster wrote widely on theological and biographical subjects and contributed 184 articles to the *Eclectic Review* between 1806 and 1839. Among the most frequently reprinted of Foster's works was the 1805 collection of his early essays. The book, appearing in several American editions between 1807 and 1845, contained Foster's twenty-one-page essay "On a Man's Writing Memoirs of Himself" which played a primary role in establishing the conventions of English and American autobiography.⁶

Concerned in most of his numerous essays with the formation and evidence of character, Foster drew a distinction between the exterior and the interior of a person's life. He admired "simple conviction" and despised "the

sly deceit of self-love” and the “self-describers who . . . think the publication of their vices necessary to crown their fame.” As much as he disliked the “confessions” of courtesans, debauchees, drunkards, and criminals, Foster delighted in accounts tracing the various stages that marked an individual’s moral, spiritual, and intellectual progress. Above all, he viewed the end of autobiography to be self-understanding, a way for a person “to acquire a complete knowledge of himself” and the course of his growth. It was, of course, axiomatic that a person’s self-history differed significantly according to the stage at which it was written, since “in the course of a long life a man may be several moral persons.” Recognition of moral, religious, and intellectual advancement and retrogression was essential, according to Foster, because of the lessons they provided and because they constituted a record to compare “with the standard of perfection.” Conscience required that there be explicit admission of delinquencies to cultivate humility and diminish vanity and “self-love.”⁷

Realizing how difficult it was for people to parade their errors, Foster returned again and again in his essay to the distinction between inner and outer character. Inner character he considered more important because an attempt to represent it exposed one to the powerful temptation to be dishonest. Without a truthful recounting of this hidden compartment, autobiography would lose much of its power for self-instruction. Foster also felt that dishonesty in this area would make an autobiography less interesting or capable of eliciting sympathy from readers. Truth, history, and divinity met as the autobiographer struggled to reveal his or her inner character:

Each mind has an interior apartment of its own, into which none but itself and the Divinity can enter. In this secluded place, the passions mingle and fluctuate in unknown agitations. Here all the fantastic and all the tragic shapes of imagination have a haunt, where they can neither be invaded nor descried. . . . Here projects, convictions, vows, are confusedly scattered, and the records of past life are laid. Here in solitary state sits Conscience, surrounded by her own thunders, which sometimes sleep, and sometimes roar, while the world does not know. . . . If, in a man’s own account of himself, written on the supposition of being seen by any other person, the substance of the secrets of this apartment be brought forth, he throws open the last asylum of his

character. . . . And if it be not brought forth, where is the integrity or value of the history . . . ?⁸

Although actually offering little advice about how to structure autobiography, his few remarks nevertheless resonated through hundreds of prefaces, reviews, and critical essays for the next century. Again and again the critics upheld his singular directive that “the *style* should be as simple as possible.”⁹

The critics who followed Foster exhibited far more interest in the readers than the writers of autobiographies. In contrast to Foster, they stressed the autobiography’s power to acquaint the reader with human virtues as well as to furnish relaxation and entertainment. Many critics contended that the chief value of the autobiography was that it was a historical document. Through autobiographies—especially those of public figures—readers could see behind the public facades of great figures and learn in detail from the events and influences that shaped their characters.¹⁰

Writing for an increasingly literate society, American critics valued autobiographies as instructive books for the education of youth. It was infinitely better, they contended, for youths to read autobiographies than novels. Because autobiographers sketched their lives from childhood to their attainment of eminence and stressed “the cultivation of intellectual and moral power,” they could provide lessons, examples, and inspirations to the young.¹¹

But what was of special concern to antebellum critics was the credibility of any autobiography. Detailing the factors that limited credibility (senility, egotism, and vanity), the critics tried to develop a series of tests to determine where it existed. As critics became more familiar with the genre, they became more confident of their ability to determine the veracity of autobiographies. By concentrating on the patterns of revelation and concealment in a work, the critics believed that they could uncover an author’s true self-portrait. A *New York Review* critic, for instance, writing in October 1838, insisted that by a close reading of an autobiography, one could determine whether it was true because “in autobiography we study character in two modes at once. We have, first, what the individual *says* of himself, and secondly, the *unconscious* revelation which he makes of himself as narrator; the picture in the glass, and the real man seen behind it.”¹²

A number of critics drew upon their own experience or sought the proof of the credibility of an autobiography in its narrative technique. Frequently

they combined the two tests. A *North American Review* critic, for example, argued in 1844 that the most believable autobiographies were those in which minuteness of detail was a salient feature: "Minuteness of narration, whether in fiction or in real life, has a singular charm for all readers. . . . Now, the *only* truth is the *whole* truth. The complete portrait is the only faithful portrait. The only true history or biography is that which tells all." For most readers the credibility of such accounts would be "attested by our experience, which necessarily comprehends the whole of our own thoughts, motives and actions." The "vast edifice" of a life had to be portrayed because the "piecemeal exhibition of another's life finds no counterpart in our own memories, which embrace every incident in our own career."¹³

Much of what critics thought was likely to be incredible about autobiographies was, they contended, inherent in the genre. Since an autobiography involved revelations about the frequently inaccessible interior of life, it often raised unanswerable questions about credibility. The personal secrets of the autobiographer represented what most critics believed constituted the most instructive aspect of his or her self-portrait—thoughts, feelings, imaginations, motives. Critics longed to see what they described as the autobiographer's "thoughts and feelings in their nakedness . . . his envy, jealousy, malice, and uncharitableness." They wanted to read the works of autobiographers willing to risk notoriety and "lay open to the world the deepest and darkest nooks of their own hearts, however ugly and loathsome may be the things which dwell therein." True histories of the inner person would always be rare, however, the critics argued, because most autobiographers lacked the necessary discrimination, analytical skills, sincerity, and self-knowledge to write them. A *New England Magazine* writer sadly concluded in 1834, we "know our enemies better than ourselves, because we judge them with more severity; we can write better lives of them than memoirs of ourselves."¹⁴

Yet they also imposed limits on such exposure. Self-revelation must not be a promiscuous exercise intended merely to shock and arouse the audience but must promote a moral life and show an eventual turning away from things bad even as they are described in detail.

Nevertheless, the author must have a proper and unavoidable dose of egotism. Many of the critics argued that egotism naturally determined both the focus and the design of life histories. Reviewing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's autobiography in October 1838, a *New York Review* critic professed

that in autobiography “if the author is himself the central point around which all seems to revolve, this is in conformity with the idea of an autobiography, and is necessary to unity of design . . . egotism is the very thing to be desired in such a work.”¹⁵

Following Foster’s injunctions, critics also expressed a desire for a “simple” style in autobiographies. Increasingly, critics translated “simple” into “appropriate,” a variable standard dependent on the times, the incidents, and the lives being described. What was, under this standard, misplaced ornamentation in one author would be appropriate in another. Critics expected an autobiographer to demonstrate lucidity, modesty, honesty, and economy. Repeatedly, critics praised those self-portraits that were “plain, unaffected” narratives marked by unity of design and artful symmetry. Especially ornate language suggested that the author was insincere.¹⁶

Many American critics identified Benjamin Franklin as the model autobiographer because of the clarity and economy of his writing. A *North American Review* evaluation of Benjamin Franklin’s autobiographical writings in 1818 varied little from the positive assessments of numerous other critics. In spite of “some trifling blemishes,” Franklin’s work was “always admirable for its precision and perspicuity. It is as transparent as the atmosphere; and his thoughts lie before us like objects seen in one of our finest and clearest days, when their very brightness and distinctness alone give us pleasure.”¹⁷

In the 1830s Douglass first encountered Franklin indirectly in Caleb Bingham’s *Columbian Orator*. In his primer, Bingham reprinted Abbé Fauchet’s 1790 eulogy of Benjamin Franklin. Fauchet praised Franklin for having “presented new and sublime ideas, in a style simple as truth, and as pure as light.” Further he contended that Franklin “laid the sacred foundations of social morality. . . . This amiable moralist descended, in his writings, to the most artless details; to the most ingenuous familiarities; to the first ideas of a rural, a commercial, and a civil life; to the dialogues of old men and children; full at once of all the verdure and all the maturity of wisdom.” Fauchet stamped the essentials of antebellum American autobiography in his paean to Franklin and assuredly made his impress upon the young Douglass as well.¹⁸

Although *The Columbian Orator* was Douglass’s key textbook during the time of his enslavement in Maryland, his central texts once he escaped from slavery were abolitionist newspapers, magazines, books, and pamphlets and

slave narratives. Such works greatly expanded his knowledge of autobiographies. In abolition sources alone, Douglass read dozens of narratives of fugitive slaves before he sat down to write his autobiography in 1844.

Between 1838 and 1844 Douglass avidly read such antislavery publications as the *Liberator*, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, *Liberty Bell*, *Emancipator*, *Anti-Slavery Almanac*, and *American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter* that contained speeches, interviews, and autobiographies of dozens of fugitive slaves including Lunsford Lane, James Curry, Lewis Clarke, and the *Amistad* rebels. Equally significant, the abolition newspapers and magazines published reviews of the autobiographies of blacks and whites and furnished Douglass with further advice on the elements of the proper autobiography. At a very early period, Douglass also came to know the “slave’s biographer,” Isaac T. Hopper, who published a long-running popular column of slave narratives in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* under the heading “Tales of Oppression.”¹⁹

Another source of information about the autobiographical canon that Douglass read repeatedly was Theodore Dwight Weld’s *American Slavery as It Is*. Douglass quoted frequently from Weld’s work in the speeches he gave between 1841 and 1845. Indeed, *American Slavery as It Is* long represented for Douglass the standard by which to measure all statements about the character of America’s “peculiar institution.” The book was, Douglass wrote in 1853, the “repository of human horrors.”²⁰

Douglass relied so extensively on personal narratives in *American Slavery as It Is* that they undoubtedly formed the structure, focus, and style of his *Narrative*. He learned, for instance, that most of the accounts that Weld published followed letters vouching for the author’s integrity and veracity. Weld himself repeatedly stressed the importance of a truthful portrayal of slavery, urged witnesses to “speak what they know, and testify what they have seen,” and commanded them to demonstrate a “fidelity to truth.” Conscious of the incredulity of his northern readers, Weld insisted on making a clear distinction between opinion and fact: “Testimony respects matters of *fact*, not matters of opinion: it is the declaration of a witness as to *facts*, not the giving of an opinion as to the nature or qualities of actions, or the *character* of a course of conduct.”²¹

American Slavery as It Is may also have played a crucial role in Douglass’s original decision to write and publish his *Narrative*. Significantly, in a pref-

atory "Note" to his book, Weld announced that the American Anti-Slavery Society intended to publish other "TRACTS, containing well authenticated facts, testimony, personal narratives, etc. fully setting forth the *condition* of American slaves." Each prospective author unknown to the Executive Committee of the Society had to furnish references. Weld specified exactly the kinds of narratives in which the society had an interest:

Facts and testimony respecting the condition of slaves, in *all respects*, are desired; their food, (kinds, quality, quantity), clothing, lodging, dwellings, hours of labor and rest, kinds of labor, with the mode of exaction, supervision, &c.—the number and times of meals each day, treatment when sick, regulations respecting their social intercourse, marriage and domestic ties, the system of torture to which they are subjected, with its various modes; and *in detail*, their *intellectual* and *moral* condition. Great care should be observed in the statement of facts. Well-weighed testimony and well-authenticated facts, with a responsible name, the Committee earnestly desire and call for.²²

Given this note, it is probably no accident that the publisher Douglass chose for his first autobiography was the American Anti-Slavery Society and that he found two people, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, "personally known" to its executive committee to write prefatory notes to his *Narrative*.

Although the other autobiographical works Douglass read were probably somewhat less influential than *American Slavery as It Is*, they were no less significant. The most salient features of the slave narratives he read in the abolition press were their brevity, directness, simplicity, and lack of specificity. Often editors prefaced the accounts with declarations that publication had been delayed until the fugitive had reached Canada. Editors of the accounts of fugitives who remained in the United States frequently tried to guarantee their anonymity by giving them fictional names, deleting specific references to their masters and places of enslavement, or citing initials for all personal and place names that might possibly serve as keys to the real identity of the narrator. While helping to insure the safety of the fugitive, such practices, the amanuenses realized, seriously undermined the credibility of the accounts. In many cases, however, the guarantee of anonymity was the *sine qua non* for obtaining accounts from frightened fugitives.²³

Significantly, Douglass had some of his first exposures to the narratives of fugitive slaves in oral rather than written form at the home of the most prolific of the slaves' amanuenses, Isaac T. Hopper. Reflecting in 1853 on his introduction to Hopper, Douglass asserted that he first saw him in September 1838 when Hopper was a witness in a fugitive slave case. In a review of Lydia Maria Child's biography of Hopper, Douglass discussed his "intimate acquaintance with the venerable, Quakerly gentleman" and his visits to Hopper's home in the early 1840s, where he "listened to some of the admirable stories and adventures in the matter of rescuing fugitives."²⁴

Possessing a nearly photographic memory and being totally fearless, Hopper aided hundreds of fugitive slaves, first in Philadelphia and later in New York. Recording the minutest details from the tales of fugitives, Hopper published about sixty of the stories in his "Tales of Oppression" column in the *Standard*. Occasionally, when introducing these narratives, Hopper explained the techniques he employed and taught Douglass much about the art of autobiography.²⁵

What impressed critics were "unvarnished" stories of the slaves' lives filled with "unstudied pathos" and "touching" incidents that only an actual observer could describe. Credibility and plainness were everything.²⁶

Thus when the scandal over the narratives of Archy Moore and James Williams broke in the late 1830s, the continuing viability of the slave autobiographies was threatened. Published anonymously in 1836, the *Memoirs of Archy Moore* produced disarray among the abolitionists when southerners protested that it was fictional. Reviewers—uncertain about the work's reliability—wavered between describing it as the factual account of a slave and a fictional work. In 1837, however, a historian and abolitionist, Richard Hildreth, admitted that he had created the narrative and disguised it as genuine autobiography. Deeply embarrassed by this affair, the antislavery societies had to rescue this critical tool in their crusade from the refuse pile to which the slaveholders wanted permanently to consign it.²⁷

There could not have been a worse time, then, for another crisis of credibility to arise as it did in 1838 with the *Narrative of James Williams*, published by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and edited by John Greenleaf Whittier. Abolitionists spent much of 1838 countering the attacks on Williams's story. The most systematic defense came from the pen of "Memento." Reminding *Liberator* readers of the general skepticism of Whittier, "Me-

mento” noted that former slaveholder James Birney of Alabama confirmed Williams’s characterization of slave life in that state, praised the account of valuable “documentary evidence,” and concluded that it was “incontrovertibly true; and is additionally valuable, because it so powerfully corroborates other evidence and facts which have been published.”

Because it was “incontrovertibly true,” the publication of Williams’s story should be followed, “Memento” contended, by a flood of similar ones: “a few more such personal narratives as the life and experience of James Williams will render the boasted ‘Southern domestic institutions’ as loathsome, as they are cruelly malignant and criminal.” What was most significant in the defense was a clear elaboration of the general credibility problem facing all abolitionist writers:

Amid the strange characteristics of mankind, no one of their moral features is more unaccountable than their complex credulity in some cases, and in others, their marvelous unbelief. This general position is illustrated in an astonishing manner, upon the subject of slavery. It seems as if our northern citizens had determined to resist all evidence respecting the practical concerns of slaveholding, until they are ocularly convinced; while they have resolved never to witness *Life in the Negro Quarters*. It is yet more perplexing, that many of our anti-slavery friends are incredulous respecting the facts which are stated by professed eye-witnesses, and the few competent narrators of slavery as it exists in our country. Thus the only citizens, who personally know what slavery is from their own observation, and who are sufficiently independent to disclose the truth, are not only disbelieved, but are also suspected of untruth, or reproached with falsehood, by the silly retort—“I will not believe it; it cannot be true.”²⁸

In spite of the complaints and defense of people like “Memento,” the Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society eventually had to consider the possibility that Williams had fabricated his story. The committee checked many of the personal and place names mentioned in Williams’s account with knowledgeable southerners who almost universally disputed his claims. After its investigation, the committee published a full retraction in November 1838 in which it came “fully to the conclusion,—that the statements of the narrative . . . are wholly false” and withdrew the book

from sale. The Williams debacle forced all abolitionist amanuenses to be more cautious, to state whether they were using real or fictitious personal and place names, and to search systematically for corroborating evidence and authenticating testimony for the oral accounts of fugitive slaves. Williams haunted Theodore Weld; he sought to exorcise fraudulent statements from the eyewitness accounts he published in *American Slavery as It Is*. The import of this crisis could not have been lost on Douglass.²⁹

Many of Douglass's views of the purpose and structure of autobiographies were those traditionally expressed by black authors since the eighteenth century. Antebellum black authors were well aware of contemporary autobiographical canons and especially the didactic purposes served by such works. Like their white contemporaries, black autobiographers often reflected on the genre and frequently explained their motives for writing in their prefaces and introductions. For example, Olaudah Equiano began his narrative of 1789 by acknowledging that it was "a little hazardous in a private and obscure individual" to publish his memoirs, establish the credibility of his account, and "escape the imputation of vanity." Significantly, the "preface" to Equiano's narrative consisted of his open letter to the British Parliament petitioning for the abolition of the African slave trade and presenting his narrative as the evidence he hoped would convince the members to answer his prayer.³⁰

The sentiments expressed in Equiano's open letter would resonate in all of the autobiographies written by antebellum African Americans. Antebellum black autobiographers consistently asserted that the chief reason for portraying their lives was the need to bear witness against slavery, to wake their fellow Americans to its evil, and to cheer those on who labored in the cause of human freedom. Truth, the antebellum black autobiographers contended, would expose the evil of slavery and contribute to its destruction. Interestingly, American whites formerly enslaved in Africa wrote autobiographies with the same didactic purposes and expectations in mind. Although the experiences of white authors formerly enslaved or held captive were recorded in published reminiscences, the autobiographical writings of black slaves grew out of their own lectures. Once published, the autobiography led to more frequent trips to the lectern as the black's *written* and *spoken* voice moved in easy tandem.³¹

Moses Roper, a former North Carolina slave, illustrated many of the con-

ventions of black autobiographies in his "Introduction" to the successive editions of his *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery*. In the first edition, published in the United States in 1838, Roper declared that he wrote his autobiography "with the view of exposing the cruel system of slavery" and with the hope that it would become "the instruments of opening the eyes of the ignorant to this system; of convincing the wicked, cruel, and hardened slave-holder; and of befriending generally the cause of oppressed humanity." His decision to publish his life story, Roper assured his readers, "did not arise from any desire to make myself conspicuous." Roper was conscious not only of the possible imputation of vanity to an autobiographer but also of the conventional rules for determining the credibility of such stories. After Thomas Price, the editor of the volume, had quoted from the letters of introduction written by American abolitionists that Roper brought to England and noted the narrative's "internal evidence of truth," the former slave confronted directly the possibility that many readers might feel that his account was "somewhat at variance with the dictates of humanity." Roper assured his readers that he did not present facts "unsubstantiated by collateral evidence, nor highly colored to the disadvantage of cruel task-masters." Finally, Roper observed that his master and other slaveholders would have an opportunity to read and contradict any aspect of his autobiography.³²

Usually, autobiographers present their views of the genre in the prefaces of their life stories. Unfortunately, during the antebellum period autobiographers often had friends and acquaintances write prefaces, and Douglass followed this route in 1845. Only later in his speeches did Douglass publicly explain why he had written his autobiography. Essentially, Douglass contended, he wrote the autobiography to authenticate his antislavery speeches—and thus his voice. Douglass delivered a typical exposition of this theme in his speech of 18 May 1846 in London in which he pointed out that after delivering anti-slavery lectures for four years

my manner was such as to create a suspicion that I was not a runaway slave, but some educated free negro, whom the abolitionists had sent forth to attract attention to what was called there a faltering cause. They said, he appears to have no fear of white people. How can he ever have been in bondage? But one strong reason for this doubt was, the

fact that I never made known to the people to whom I spoke where I came from. . . . But it became necessary to set myself right before the public in the United States, and to reveal the whole facts of my case. I did not feel it safe to do so till last spring, when I was solicited to it by a number of anti-slavery friends, who assured me that it would be safe to do so. I then published a narrative of my experience in slavery, in which I detailed the cruelties of it as I had myself felt them.³³

Douglass knew well that perhaps the central problem he faced was to establish his credibility. To do so, he adopted several strategies. First, he placed a daguerreotype of himself as the book's frontispiece and signed his name below it. Before the reader had even begun the *Narrative*, they had seen a reproduction of the author and of his handwriting, evidence of his literacy. Next he preceded his text with letters from William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, who served as witnesses to his veracity. Finally, in the text of the *Narrative* Douglass used real names when referring to people and places and described how he came to know Garrison and Phillips.³⁴

The letters of Garrison and Phillips afforded powerful confirmation of Douglass's "many sufferings" and his several attainments. Acknowledging the popular misconception that slavery in Maryland was less severe than in the Deep South, Garrison proclaimed that Douglass's lived experience belied that stereotype and proved that slavery in whatever form still degraded blacks, leaving nothing "undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind." Garrison further asserted that he was deeply moved by the way Douglass had emerged from this prison house to "consecrate" his life as an antislavery lecturer with an "intellect richly endowed" and a character filled with "gentleness," "meekness," "manliness." Douglass had passed through all that he claimed. Reiterating some of the points Garrison made, Phillips wrote of his personal acquaintance with Douglass and emphasized his "truth, candor, and sincerity." The *Narrative*, Phillips argued, gave "a fair specimen of the whole truth. No one-sided portrait,—no wholesale complaints,—but strict justice done."³⁵

But Douglass did not rest even here in promoting his authenticity. Soon after the publication of the *Narrative*, he took a bold and unprecedented step: he mailed a copy of the *Narrative* to his master Thomas Auld and thereby

challenged him publicly to refute it. Auld obviously had the greatest motive and was in the best position to disprove Douglass's *Narrative* if it were untrue. Although Douglass relished this gesture, he also compounded his risk of realizing the fugitive's greatest fear—recapture. At a time when many of his fellow fugitives recounted the story of their lives only on condition that their anonymity be maintained by suppressing their true names, those of their masters, and the places of their enslavement, Douglass's revelations of such details in the face of the obvious threat their publication posed represented the greatest authentication of his text.³⁶

The swift acclaim Douglass's work achieved attested to the success of these verifying methods. Of all of the other twenty-seven black autobiographies published before 1846, only six went through four or more editions during the nineteenth century and only three of these were translated into foreign languages. The most successful of them were the narratives of Charles Ball (six English-language editions), James A. Gronnisaw (six English-language and one Swedish edition), Moses Roper (seven English-language and one Celtic edition), and Olaudah Equiano (twelve English-language, one Dutch, and one German edition).

The *Narrative* far outstripped any of its predecessors. Between its appearance in May and September 1845, more than 4,500 copies of the *Narrative* were sold. Three years later it had been translated into French, German, and Dutch. Between 1845 and 1847, two Irish and four English editions were published. According to Douglass, the *Narrative* had "passed through nine editions in England" by January 1848. Nine American editions had been published by 1850. In six years a total of twenty-one editions of the book had been published in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. By 1853, at least 30,000 copies of the book had been sold. The price of the American editions varied between 25 and 35 cents.³⁷

The *Narrative* served several extra-literary purposes. Published just as Douglass was leaving the United States for an extended tour of England, Scotland, and Ireland, the *Narrative* promoted his lectures. Sales of the book before and after his appearance in a town helped him meet his expenses. To the extent that readers in the United Kingdom believed the *Narrative*, they were that much more prepared to accept Douglass's lectures castigating America and American slavery. Douglass added further drama to his highly publicized "flight" to Great Britain to avoid the certain recapture assured by

the publication of his *Narrative* by constantly alluding to this threat in his speeches.³⁸

At the beginning of his tour of the United Kingdom, references to the *Narrative* became stock rhetorical devices in Douglass's speeches. Douglass frequently emphasized the threat of recapture when he began a speech. Typical was his assertion in a speech in Cork, Ireland, in October 1845 that although publication of the *Narrative* removed doubts that he had been a slave, it produced some excitement in the South, endangering his safety: "The excitement at last increased so much that it was thought better for me to get out of the way lest my master might use some stratagems to get me back into his clutches. I am here then in order to avoid the scent of the blood hounds of America, and of spreading light on the subject of her slave system."³⁹

The *Narrative* was the most widely reviewed of all antebellum black autobiographies. Dozens of newspapers and magazines published in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe praised the book, and reviews exceeding 3,000 words were not unusual. Varying from long summaries containing numerous extracts to thoughtful essays on the nature of black autobiographies, the reviews generally accepted Douglass's self-portrait as true, interesting, and instructive.⁴⁰

Reviewers in the antislavery press flocked to celebrate the *Narrative*. The *Liberator* inaugurated the campaign while the *Narrative* was still being printed. Announcing the forthcoming book in a lead editorial on 9 May 1845, the *Liberator* stressed that Douglass alone wrote the account. The acting editor of the newspaper then reprinted in full Garrison's preface. The reviewer for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* attested that the book was "illustrated by a remarkably good engraving of the author" and buttressed this authenticating device with an indication of his personal acquaintance with the author. The *Liberator* added that the *Narrative* "was written entirely by Mr. Douglass, and reveals all the facts in regard to his birth-place,—the names of his mother, master, overseer, &c &c."⁴¹

The May 1845 annual meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Society was also used to advance the *Narrative*. Attended by Garrison, Phillips, and Douglass, the convention was extensively covered in the press. Quickly taking advantage of free advertising, the first motion of the business committee offered by Wendell Phillips on 27 May welcomed the *Narrative* as "The new Anti-Slavery lecturer" and commended it to "all those who believe the slaves

of the South to be either well treated, or happy, or ignorant of their right to freedom, or in need of preparation to make them fit for freedom; and that we urge upon the friends of the cause the duty of circulating it among all classes.”⁴²

Abolitionist critics contended that the *Narrative* exposed slavery where it was allegedly “mildest” and that it would be an important “auxiliary” in the abolition crusade. The *Liberator* review of 23 May 1845 asserted that the *Narrative* “cannot fail to produce a great sensation wherever it may happen to circulate, especially among the slavocracy. . . . What a lifting of the veil is this, to convince the skeptical that it is impossible to exaggerate the horrors and enormities of that impious system!”⁴³

The *Narrative* substantiated the intellectual capacity of African Americans for many critics. The growth of moral sensibilities, acquisition of a rudimentary education, and evidence of courage in the midst of slavery’s degradation recounted by Douglass indicated that he was an exceptional man and that all blacks freed of the slave’s fetters could improve themselves. The abolitionist editor of the Oberlin *Evangelist* found in Douglass’s autobiography an expression of “some of the noblest sentiments of the human heart,” a harbinger that “the days of Oppression are numbered,” and an example of the potentiality of blacks once emancipated. Abolitionist Mary Howitt in her review of 1847 in London’s *People’s Journal* described Douglass as “a noble human being” and viewed his *Narrative* as an incomparable catalog of slavery’s horrors: “If we were to write ten volumes on the atrocities and miseries of slavery in the abstract, we could say nothing half so impressive and conclusive as is the simple, honest narrative of a real slave, written by himself.”⁴⁴

Several critics declared how instructive the book would be to all classes of readers. “This little book taught by examples the cruel workings of the systems of Slavery, in a region where its burden is comparatively light, and the plainness of the narration and the simplicity of the style made it attractive to all classes of readers.” One of the most enthusiastic critiques was in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* of 12 June 1845. Contending that the book would enlighten even slavery’s defenders, the reviewer observed: “This book ought to be read by all before whose mental blindness visions of happy slaves continually dance. It is the story of the life of a man of great intellectual power, in the very circumstances of Slavery,—in the Northernmost of the slave states, and under kind masters.”⁴⁵

Nonabolitionist journals, especially those published in the United Kingdom, upheld the work's didactic purpose for a European audience distant from American slavery. The *Cork Examiner* on 22 October 1845 asserted that the *Narrative* "gives an insight into the slave system in America, which cannot elsewhere be obtained in so concise and interesting a form." Similarly, *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* published a review of the *Narrative* on 24 January 1846 in which the author declared that it would "help considerably to disseminate correct ideas respecting slavery and its attendant evils. Some of the passages present a dismal picture of what is endured by the negro race in the slave-holding states of the union." The review in England's Newcastle *Guardian* looked upon the *Narrative* primarily as a revelation about American religion and as a corrective to many previously published accounts of American slavery.⁴⁶

Writers for nonabolitionist journals tended to be more skeptical than the abolitionist reviewers and were anxious to determine the credibility of Douglass's account. Generally assuming "that Frederick Douglass is what he professes," the London *Spectator* reviewer thought it "improbable" that Douglass fought with a slaveholder or learned to read in the manner he described in the *Narrative*. Doubt about Douglass's authorship lingered until the end and the reviewer concluded: "If this narrative is really true in its basis, and untouched by any one save Douglass himself, it is a singular book, and he is a more singular man. Even if it is of the nature of the true stories of De Foe, it is curious as a picture of slavery, and worth reading."⁴⁷

Most critics had fewer doubts about Douglass's credibility than the *Spectator* reviewer. The Boston *Transcript*, for example, contended that the *Narrative* "bears throughout the indelible marks of truth." The Boston *Courier* asserted that the book contained "many descriptions of scenes at the South, which, if true, bear sufficient witness against the 'peculiar institution,' to make every honest man to wish its downfall soon, and by almost any means. And there seems to be no reason for believing that more than the truth is told." In November 1845, the *British Friend* declared that "Truth seems stamped on every page of this narrative."⁴⁸

For a few critics, the prefatory letters enhanced the credibility of Douglass's autobiography. The London *League* referred, for instance, to the book's being "certified by highly respectable persons" as "authentic." William Howitt, reviewing the first Irish edition of the book for the London *Atlas*, commented

on Douglass's authenticating prefaces because readers might well ask, "Who is this FREDERICK DOUGLASS? And what guarantee have we that he is what he represents himself to be? In answer to this, we have only to say that his book is prefaced by two admirable letters from the well-known champions of American freedom, WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON and WENDELL PHILLIPS, bearing the highest testimonies to his character and to his services in the abolition cause."⁴⁹

Other critics distrusted the letters. The most extreme reaction came from the *Religious Spectator* reviewer who felt their endorsement of the book was reason enough not to read it: "We might possibly have laid it aside without reading it, from perceiving that it was published under the patronage of several individuals, whose course on the subject of slavery we have never regarded as either politic or right." The New York *Tribune* found Phillips's letter to be neutral, but Garrison's remarks counterproductive. The *Tribune* was highly critical of the "noble and generous" Garrison and contended that the tone of his comments made Douglass's seem "very just and temperate" in contrast. Beyond this, the *Tribune* argued that the prefatory comments did little to authenticate Douglass's account. Phillips, at least, did not invalidate the account. By contrast, Garrison's comments were, the *Tribune* charged, "in his usual over emphatic style . . . he has indulged in violent invective and denunciation till he has spoiled the temper of his mind. Like a man who has been in the habit of screaming himself hoarse to make the deaf hear, he can no longer pitch his voice on a key agreeable to common ears."⁵⁰

Many commented on Douglass's use of personal and place names. The Bristol *Mercury* asserted that Douglass had done much to remove doubt about his identity in the book by "giving the names of the masters under whom he had lived, and dates and events which would at once prove the correctness of his account." Specificity represented a major part of the *Tribune's* reason for accepting the validity of the *Narrative*: "He has had the courage to name the persons, times and places, thus exposing himself to obvious danger, and setting the seal on his deep convictions as to the religious need of speaking the whole truth."⁵¹

But most critics looked beyond specificity for additional evidence to show that Douglass had written his autobiography and that it was a faithful account of his life. Ironically, they found confirmation of Douglass's written words in his spoken words. A thoughtful and very skeptical reviewer for the

Religious Spectator, upon being given a copy of the book, initially cast it aside because it had been published by the American Anti-Slavery Society. With such an imprimatur on the book, he doubted that Douglass had either written it or was a fugitive slave until he learned “upon good authority, that his lectures are characterized by as able reasoning, as genuine wit, and as bold and stirring appeals, as we almost ever find in connexion with the highest intellectual culture.”⁵²

Skeptical critics in the United Kingdom often delayed the publication of reviews of the *Narrative* until they had an opportunity to hear Douglass speak. In his speeches they found proof that he had written his autobiography. Typical of such critics was the Irish abolitionist Isaac Nelson, who declared in January 1846:

I looked forward with much interest and some incredulity to a meeting with the author of this unique piece of autobiography, doubting whether any man reared a slave, and so recently escaped from bonds, could, under the circumstances, produce such a work. My meeting with Frederick Douglass dispelled my doubts; he is indeed an extraordinary man—the type of a class—such an intellectual phenomenon as only appears at times in the republic of letters. I have had opportunities of observing his mind in several attitudes, and applied to various subjects during his stay in Belfast, and I take leave to say that not only do I consider him adequate to the task of writing such a book as the one before us, but also of achieving more Herculean feats.⁵³

A number of reviewers found it impossible to separate Douglass the antislavery orator from Douglass the autobiographer. Identifying Douglass as an escaped slave and “itinerant lecturer” of the American Anti-Slavery Society, a reviewer for the London *Spectator* declared that Douglass, “having a natural force and fluency of language, and dealing with things within his own experience, . . . appears to have spoken with so much acceptance as to have been stimulated to commit to paper the autobiographical portion of his addresses.” The New York *Tribune* reacted in a similar fashion in an 1845 review. Douglass, the *Tribune* reported, “is said to be an excellent speaker—can speak from a thorough personal experience—and has upon the audience, beside, the influence of a strong character and uncommon talents. In the book before us he has put into the story of his life the thoughts, the feel-

ings and the adventures that have been so affecting through the living voice; nor are they less so from the printed page.”⁵⁴

Some of the most significant reviews concentrated on Douglass’s revelations about the development of his interior character. The *British Friend* in its November 1845 assessment of the style and content of the “plain, but eloquent narrative,” declared: “In reading it, one sees before him the fearful tossings and heavings of an immortal soul, herded with beasts, and compelled to grope about, feeling after God among reptiles. The reader feels himself in communion with immortality—sunk to a thing—with the image of God turned into a brute.” Similarly, the review in an issue of the *Newcastle Guardian* noted the revelations about Douglass’s character contained in “his simple yet spirit-stirring narration” of his life and especially “the risings of noble and generous feelings of his soul, and of the exertions which he made for the acquisition of knowledge, despite the almost insuperable obstacles which were thrown in his way.” Abolitionist Ralph Varian, writing in the December 1845 issue of the *British Friend*, asserted that the book was “a revelation of the wondrous power which a highly gifted nature possesses, to triumph over brute force, and circumstances the most disheartening.”⁵⁵

The work’s plainness of style suggested an absence of guile and thus advanced its credibility for the critics. The Lynn, Massachusetts, *Pioneer* argued that the *Narrative* was “evidently drawn with a nice eye, and the coloring is chaste and subdued, rather than extravagant or overwrought. Thrilling as it is, and full of the most burning eloquence, it is yet simple and unimpassioned. Its eloquence is the eloquence of truth, and so is as simple and touching as the impulses of childhood.” In his January 1846 review of the *Narrative*, the Reverend Isaac Nelson of Belfast, Ireland, informed his compatriots: “I regard the narrative of FREDERICK DOUGLASS as a literary wonder. The incidents of his life are of such a kind as to hold the reader spell-bound, while they are related in a style simple, perspicuous, and eloquent.” Similarly, while viewing the *Narrative* as a “curiosity” focused too heavily on the “incredible brutality” of some individuals, the London *League’s* reviewer concluded: “But even as a literary production, this book possesses no ordinary claims. The author, though uneducated, or rather self-educated, displays great natural powers: he utters his thoughts always lucidly, and often with a polished and vigorous eloquence.” The New York *Tribune* was less reserved in its praise of the style of the book than the *League*. In its long

critique, the *Tribune* asserted: "Considered merely as a narrative, we have never read one more simple, true, coherent, and warm with genuine feeling. It is an excellent piece of writing."⁵⁶

The pathos and metaphorical flights in the *Narrative* elicited comments from several reviewers. Douglass's autobiography was, they argued, "affecting," "touching," "unspeakably affecting," and filled with passages demonstrating "simple pathos," "deep pathos," or "pathos and sublimity." Wilson Armistead, reviewing the book in 1848, asserted that "The narrative of Douglass contains many affecting incidents, many passages of great eloquence and power." "A.M.," a *Liberator* correspondent, illustrated most fully the pathetic elements of the *Narrative* when she wrote from Albany, New York: "I have wept over the pages of Dickens' 'Oliver Twist'—I have moistened with my tears whole chapters of Eugene Sue's mysteries of Paris—but Douglass's history of the wrongs of the American Slave, brought, not tears—no, tears refused me their comfort—its horrible truths crowded in such quick succession, and entered so deep into the chambers of my soul, as to entirely close the relief valve. . . . I groaned in the agony of my spirit." According to the critics, the passages demonstrating Douglass's masterful use of pathos included those describing his relationship with his mother, the songs of the slaves, his acquisition of an education, and the treatment of aged slaves. The most frequent comments on the use of metaphors in the *Narrative* centered on Douglass's apostrophe to freedom as he watched ships in the Chesapeake Bay.⁵⁷

The reception accorded the *Narrative* in the South ironically served to verify its details and lend authority to it. The American Anti-Slavery Society apparently exhausted every means to push the book in Maryland and was relatively successful. The early reactions of Marylanders to the *Narrative* boosted sales because they testified to its credibility. For example, the editor of a Philadelphia newspaper, the *Elevator*, while reviewing Douglass's "exceedingly interesting" autobiography, reported that on a trip to Maryland he encountered several blacks who knew Douglass "by his assumed as well as by his real name, and related to us many interesting incidents about their former companion."⁵⁸

More direct testimony validating the *Narrative* came from the pens of white Marylanders personally acquainted with slavery on the Eastern Shore and Douglass's owners. This valuable testimony began when a white resi-

dent of Baltimore reported in September 1845 that Douglass's *Narrative* "is now circulating and being read in this city, and five hundred copies are still wanted here. They would be read with avidity, and do much good." Signing his letter "A Citizen of Maryland," the writer then assessed the credibility of Douglass's account: "I have made some inquiry, and have reason to believe his statements are true. Col. Edward Lloyd's relatives are my relatives! Let this suffice for the present." Another white native of Maryland and acquaintance of the Lloyds read Douglass's account in the spring of 1846 and wrote, "[F]rom my knowledge of slavery as it really exists . . . I am fully prepared to bear a decided testimony to the truth of all his assertions, with regard to the discipline upon the plantations of Maryland, as well as his descriptions of cruelty and murder."⁵⁹

Unfavorable southern responses to the *Narrative*, however, far outstripped the favorable ones over the next several years. Whether it was true or false, most southern whites felt the *Narrative* was an incendiary document inciting slaves to rebel. As late as the spring of 1849 a grand jury in Grayson County, Virginia, indicted Jarvis C. Bacon for "feloniously and knowingly circulating" the *Narrative* because the jurors felt the book was "intended to cause slaves to rebel and make insurrection, and denying the right of property of masters in their slaves."⁶⁰

However much Douglass may have sympathized with Jarvis Bacon, he first had to confront the persistent challenge of A. C. C. Thompson of Delaware. Apparently prompted by Douglass's former owner Thomas Auld, Thompson wrote a long review essay of the *Narrative* for the *Delaware Republican*. Describing Douglass's autobiography variously as "dirty," "false," "infamous libel," and a "ridiculous publication," Thompson contended that it was filled with "glaring falsehoods" and declared "the whole to be a budget of falsehoods from beginning to end." While refuting Douglass's claim that slave children were customarily separated from their mothers in Maryland, Thompson concentrated on correcting the *Narrative*'s unflattering characterization of Edward Lloyd, Aaron Anthony, Giles Hicks, Austin Gore, Thomas Lambdin, Edward Covey, and Thomas Auld. From what he knew of these men and Douglass when he was a slave, Thompson concluded that Douglass did not write the book, which, he argued, bore "the glaring impress of falsehood on every page."⁶¹

This was just the challenge Douglass had been awaiting. Writing to

Thompson from England in 1846, Douglass thanked him profusely for proving that he had been a slave and that the people he wrote about were not fictitious. To Thompson's charge that he had maligned good masters and Christian men with charitable feelings, Douglass restated his complaints concerning his treatment and observed, "The cowskin makes as deep a gash in my flesh, when wielded by a professed saint, as it does when wielded by an open sinner." The chief focus of Douglass's response was, however, on Thompson's "triumphant vindication of the truth" of this *Narrative*: "your testimony is direct and perfect—just what I have long wanted . . . you . . . brush away the miserable insinuation of my northern pro-slavery enemies, that I have used fictitious not real names." Douglass promised to add Thompson's letter as an appendix to the second Irish edition of his *Narrative*.⁶²

Thompson launched a second and more systematic attack on Douglass's autobiography after some northern journalists expressed doubts about the *Delaware Republican* review. As the basis for his second attack, Thompson collected letters from Thomas Auld, James Dawson, Dr. A. C. C. Thompson, L. Datsun, and Thomas Graham denying the validity of Douglass's autobiography. The central focus of the letters was the character of Thomas Auld. Auld's neighbors and acquaintances contended that Douglass's portrayal of Auld was "a base and villainous fabrication," "basely false," and "palpably untrue." A number of Thompson's witnesses claimed that Auld's "conduct to his servants was more like an indulgent father than a master." Auld himself denied that he had ever flogged Douglass and claimed that Douglass had suppressed information about his promise that "when he was 25 years old I would emancipate him; . . . He does not say one word about this in his *Narrative*, as it would not have answered to have mentioned so much truth." Thompson argued that the testimony of Auld and his neighbors demonstrated that "the assertions of this negro Douglass are nothing more than gross misrepresentations."⁶³

On 6 February 1846, when Douglass wrote the preface to the second Irish edition of his autobiography, he kept his promise to Thompson. In spite of the confident tone of his earlier response to Thompson, Douglass nevertheless repeated in his preface sections of the report of his farewell meeting in Lynn, Massachusetts, and the resolutions passed at that meeting testifying to his fugitive status. He also reprinted the declaration of a committee of the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society that Douglass "has long been known to us

by reputation, and is now introduced to us by letters from some of the most distinguished and faithful friends of the Anti-Slavery cause in the United States.”

Douglass’s central focus in the four-page preface, however, was Thompson. Conceding that the two naturally “differ in our details,” Douglass began his references to Thompson by declaring: “He agrees with me at least in the important fact, that I am what I proclaim myself to be, an ungrateful fugitive from the ‘patriarchal institutions’ of the Slave States; and he certifies that many of the heroes of my *Narrative* are still living and doing well, as ‘honored and worthy members of the Methodist Episcopal Church.’” The Thompson-Douglass exchange maintained interest in the *Narrative* for years after its publication. Douglass fueled the fires by repeatedly referring to it in his speeches, letters, and editorials.⁶⁴

What concerned Douglass most, however, about Thompson’s charges was the allegation that he had misrepresented the character of his master Thomas Auld. Since Auld had specifically denied that Douglass’s portrayal of him was accurate, Douglass concentrated more and more on Auld in his speeches and writings. With consummate skill, Douglass transformed Auld, in the public mind, into the archetypal vindictive slaveholder desperate to recapture and punish his former slave. Speaking in London in May 1846, Douglass gave a characteristic presentation when he said that his master, after trying unsuccessfully to refute the *Narrative*, had transferred title in him to his brother, who “resolves that if ever I touch American soil, I shall be instantly reduced to a state of slavery. However, it is not to a state of slavery that they wish now to have me reduced. They have a feeling of revenge to gratify.”⁶⁵

Thomas Auld’s actions after Douglass arrived in England highlighted and exaggerated the danger the fugitive slave faced. By giving the impression that Douglass would be immediately reenslaved if he returned to the United States, Auld created greater sympathy for Douglass in the United Kingdom that eventually led abolitionists there to raise money to purchase the fugitive so they could manumit him. Long before the inauguration of this manumission effort, however, Douglass began a literary and oratorical campaign to neutralize Thomas Auld’s assault on the credibility of his *Narrative*. Even in responding to attacks from third parties, Douglass tried, whenever possible, to allude to Auld’s letter to Thompson. The earliest opportunity Doug-

lass had for a full response to Auld came in 1846, when an American in the United Kingdom declared that Douglass lied about slavery in his speeches. Writing a response from Glasgow in April 1846, Douglass concentrated on Auld and contended that Auld felt so keenly Douglass's "exposures" and "severe goadings" that his "old master is in a state of mind quite favorable to an attempt at re-capture . . . to feed his revenge." According to Douglass, Auld told "a positive lie," when he swore "he never struck me, or told any one else to do so." Recalling an occasion when Auld beat him "until he wearied himself," Douglass declared: "My memory in such matters, is better than his."⁶⁶

Two years later Douglass began using Auld's denial of the validity of the *Narrative* in an attempt to goad his former master into a public debate. He inaugurated the campaign by writing his first public letter to his master on 3 September 1848, the anniversary of his escape from slavery. Receiving no reply from Auld, Douglass then reprinted his response of 1846 to A. C. C. Thompson in the 13 October 1848 issue of the *North Star*. Then, on 3 September 1849, Douglass wrote his second letter to Auld. Although other fugitive slaves wrote public letters to their masters, few of them tried to use their correspondence as Douglass did to shore up the credibility of their autobiographies. Douglass, for example, began his second "friendly epistle" to Auld by denying that he would "wilfully malign the character even of a slaveholder" and asserted: "I can say, with a clear conscience, in all that I have ever written or spoken respecting yourself, I have tried to remember that, though I am beyond your power and control, I am still accountable to our common Father and Judge,—in the sight of whom I believe that I stand acquitted of all intentional misrepresentation against you. Of course, I have said many hard things respecting yourself; but all has been based upon what I knew of you at the time I was a slave in your family."⁶⁷

Three other critics agreed, in part, with the claims of Thomas Auld and A. C. C. Thompson. The most important of such reviews of the *Narrative* appeared in July 1849 when the Reverend Ephraim Peabody included it in his thirty-two-page *Christian Examiner* essay, "Narratives of Fugitive Slaves." Peabody's review of the autobiographies of Henry Watson, Lewis and Milton Clarke, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, and Douglass was important for two reasons. First, Peabody was one of the few antebellum critics to concentrate on black autobiographies as literature. Second, Frederick Douglass published a response to Peabody's essay. In his oft-quoted opening

paragraph, Peabody declared: "AMERICA has the mournful honor of adding a new department to the literature of civilization,—the autobiographies of escaped slaves." Viewing such works as "remarkable as being pictures of slavery by the slave" revealing the black's "native love of freedom" and sense of poetry and romance, they contained, Peabody asserted, adventures comparable to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁶⁸

Peabody was most impressed with the autobiography of Josiah Henson and spent fourteen pages summarizing it because, he asserted, his readers would "be interested in the efforts of one who, without noise or pretension, without bitterness towards the whites, without extravagant claims in behalf of the blacks, has patiently, wisely, and devotedly given himself to the improvement of the large body of his wretched countrymen amongst whom his lot has been cast." Writing approvingly of Henson's attempt to purchase his freedom, his religious convictions, his "fidelity," "freedom from exaggeration," "absence of personal bitterness," and "commiseration for all classes," Peabody declared that Henson's narrative presented "the best picture of the evils incident to slave life on the plantations which can be found."⁶⁹

All of the other autobiographies, and especially Douglass's, suffered in comparison to Henson's. Indeed, from Peabody's perspective, beside Henson's account, the other autobiographies

possess no especial interest beyond what must belong to the life of almost any fugitive slave. They are records of degradation on the part of both blacks and whites,—of suffering and wrong and moral corruption. They give, doubtless, a just idea of what slavery is to the slave. But, on the other hand, while we have no reason to question the truth of particular facts representing individuals, we have no doubt that they convey an altogether erroneous idea of the general character of the masters. The best qualities of the master are likely to appear anywhere rather than in his connection with the slave. And except it be an easy kindness, the slave is in no position to estimate aright the virtues of one who, towards himself, appears simply as a power whom he cannot resist. They stand in such utterly false relations to each other, that their whole intercourse must necessarily be vitiated, and the worst qualities of each, and these almost exclusively, must be perpetually forced on the attention of the other. But human society could not long

exist were the great body of slaveholders like those whom these narratives describe.⁷⁰

Peabody admitted that he was personally acquainted with Douglass and that his narrative “contains the life of a superior man.” He then shifted to a critique of Douglass’s speaking style. Peabody took special umbrage at Douglass’s “severity of judgement and a one-sidedness of view,” his “seeing only the evils of slavery” and his “violence and extravagance of expression.” Although Peabody acknowledged “the sympathy which his narrative excites, and our respect for the force of character he has shown in rising from the depths of bondage,” he let his critical remarks stand in hopes they would lead Douglass to follow a wiser course.⁷¹

Douglass responded to Peabody in an editorial in the *North Star* on 3 August 1849. Contending that because Peabody was a northern minister he was “ill qualified” to write his essay, Douglass argued that, contrary to Peabody’s claims, there were few truly antislavery masters. Northerners had, for too long, been deceived by southern words. Douglass conceded that “slaveholders frequently speak of slavery as an evil . . . in the presence of persons from the North,” but rarely in front of slaves, and concluded that “if we judge the slaveholder by his words, it will be difficult to convict him of unkindness to his slaves, or to charge him with the desire to continue the relation of slavery; but the unmistakable language of conduct leaves no doubt of his guilt in both these points. To detest slavery in words, and to cling to it in practice, is a display of hypocrisy that should deceive no one.” Rejecting Peabody’s advice about the style and content of his lectures, Douglass then turned to his criticisms of the slave autobiographies. In the process he defended the honesty of his portrait of slaveholders:

Speaking of the Narratives, Mr. Peabody admits, “they give a just idea of what slavery is to the slave,” but adds, “they convey an altogether erroneous idea of the character of the masters.” Here we think Mr. Peabody’s logic at fault. What slavery is to the slave, the slaveholder is to the slave; and the character of the slaveholder may be fairly inferred from his treatment of the slave. It is not by the courtesy and hospitality which slaveholders extend to Northern clergymen and travellers, whose good opinions they think desirable, that we are to learn their true characters. Here they have an end to attain. But it is

their conduct towards those over whom they have unlimited power, by which they are to be tried and adjudged. In this relation they act freely and without restraint; in the other case they act from necessity.⁷²

Support for, and popularization of, the views Douglass expressed in his *Narrative* and responses to Thompson and Peabody came from Harriet Beecher Stowe. The publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 led to renewed interest in all slave autobiographies, and especially those of Josiah Henson, Lewis Clarke, and Douglass. When reviewers questioned "whether the representations of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' are a fair representation of slavery as it at present exists," Stowe published in 1853 *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, she claimed, was the factual base for the novel. The *Key* contained a collection of "real incidents,—of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered." To prove that George Harris, the intelligent mulatto character, was not overdrawn in her novel, Stowe quoted extracts from the autobiographies of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Josiah Henson, and Frederick Douglass because their accounts, she contended, were "related by those who know slavery by the best of all tests—experience; and they are given by men who have earned a character in freedom which makes their word as good as the word of any man living." The central incident that Stowe focused on in Douglass's *Narrative* was his description of his acquisition of an education, which she argued was "a most interesting and affecting parallel" to George's teaching himself to read and write.⁷³

Stowe's defense and use of Douglass's *Narrative* and other black autobiographies prompted the *Key*'s critics to comment specifically on the slave testimony section and to publish their reflections on slave autobiographies and Douglass's account. For reviewers in southern newspapers and magazines, the *Key* sometimes led to extended criticism of a body of literature they had previously ignored. The critic in the July 1853 issue of the *Southern Quarterly Review*, for example, found little that was credible in slave autobiographies:

The runaway narratives are, no doubt, pure inventions of the cunning fugitives, to work upon the charities and sympathies of those who are simple enough to receive their statements as truthful. . . . Such tales of torture of the whites, such pictures of sorrow by the meek and sensitive blacks, would draw tears from eyes of stone. . . . These narratives are now pretty much stereotyped. The runaways have learned their part,

and they go through it, on the one key, with great dexterity, and with daily improvement on the music; so that the horrors of poor Frederick Douglass, himself, have been greatly surpassed by later sufferers, who have set up as rivals for Northern favour.⁷⁴

Although there is no evidence that Douglass responded to the essay in the *Southern Quarterly Review*, he did react to similar criticisms of Harriet Beecher Stowe's works in *Graham's Magazine*. The dispute arose over some general comments made by the editor in the course of reviewing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He included his severe criticisms of recent writings on slavery in an essay entitled "Black Letters; or Uncle Tom-Foolery in Literature." George Graham complained that the bookshelves "groan under the weight of Sambo's woes, done up in covers! . . . We hate this niggerism, and hope it may be done away with." Graham admonished writers to "turn to something worthier than these negro subjects" and expressed his displeasure over the literary "incursion of blacks." After a scathing attack on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Graham refused to review "the other black books—those literary nigritudes—those little tadpoles of the press—sable bodies and stirring tales."⁷⁵

Douglass replied by classing Graham among the "Northern cringers to the slave power" and arguing that it was an "ungenerous and ungentlemanly attack (*'miscalled a Review'*)." Graham's attack on Stowe was, however, understandable: "Reckrimination is the favorite artillery of the defenders and abettors of the slave system." Graham accepted Douglass's challenge by attacking him specifically in the March issue of his magazine. Graham contended that although he respected Douglass, "we hate the present negro literature—especially that of Fred.'s, which by abusing the white, is intended to elevate the black man." Arguing that Graham indicted himself, Douglass reprinted Graham's March editorial without comment.⁷⁶

Among antebellum critics of Douglass's *Narrative*, George Graham was in a distinct minority of those claiming that the book had little literary merit. Along with A. C. C. Thompson, Ephraim Peabody, Thomas Auld, and the *Southern Quarterly Review*, Graham felt the book exaggerated the faults of southern whites, contained more invention than truth, or had not been written by Douglass. Contrary to these views, the overwhelming majority of antebellum critics found much to praise in the *Narrative*.

Blazoned, scrutinized, celebrated, excoriated, Frederick Douglass by the early 1850s was fixed in the American public's mind as a real person who had earlier passed through the mill of slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Subjected to the tough test of credibility leveled against nineteenth-century autobiographers, he had almost singlehandedly restored vigor to the slave narratives as key weapons in the antislavery crusade. But Douglass also established that his tremendous gift as a writer was not limited to political instruments. Douglass proved himself a master of one of the most American of literary genres—the salvational autobiography.

Embracing the tradition of Puritan conversion narratives, Indian captivity narratives, and especially the secularized yet deeply moral autobiographies best represented by Benjamin Franklin's, Douglass so crafted his work that his positive relationship with them all was unmistakable as he, too, encountered and renounced the snares of the world and stayed to an ever clearer pursuit of moral responsibility, wisdom, and freedom. However black, enslaved, and seemingly other, his affecting and lucid prose argued for oneness with Franklin and his racial brethren. By jeopardizing his very security as a fugitive in order to rebuild the credibility of the American slave narrative, none so dramatically as Douglass integrated both the horror and the great quest of the African American experience into this deep stream of American autobiography. He advanced and extended that tradition and is rightfully designated one of its greatest practitioners.

Wye House, plantation home of the Lloyd family, employer of Douglass's first owner, Aaron Anthony. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society, Z24.565VF.

“Captain’s House” on the Wye House plantation. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society, Z24.562VF. Photograph by H. Robins Hollyday.

The Maryland Eastern Shore at the time of Douglass's boyhood. Lucas Fielding, Jr., *The State of Maryland. Detail of the Eastern Shore* (Baltimore, 1840). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, LC-g3844b-wd000016.

Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood at the time of Douglass's residence in the 1820s and 1830s. Lucas Fielding, Jr., *Plan of the City of Baltimore* (detail) (Baltimore, 1836). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, LC-g3840-ct000793.

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OF
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AN
AMERICAN SLAVE.

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