BY JAMES MATLACK

The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass

THE BEST-KNOWN and most influential slave narrative written in America was probably the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* Within four months of its publication in 1845 five thousand copies were sold. Aided by favorable reviews and new editions, both in America and Britain, some thirty thousand had been sold by 1860. The *Narrative* thrust Douglass into the forefront of the anti-slavery movement. Coupled with his extensive speaking tours, it made Douglass the first black American to "command an audience that extended beyond local boundaries or racial ties."[1]

Douglass' *Narrative* is consistently cited as one of the best-written autobiographies among scores of such accounts produced by or in the name of ex-slaves during the 1840s and 1850s. Much of its effectiveness was due to the superior technique with which Douglass told his tale. Lurid reports on the evils of slavery were plentiful. Douglass' *Narrative* was exceptional in the degree of artistic skill and shaping through which it conveyed a similar message. The following essay will examine the symbolic value of Douglass' autobiographical act, especially the relationship between his literary creation and his actual life. Comparisons among the successive versions of his autobiography will clarify this relationship and demonstrate the literary excellence of the 1845 *Narrative.* The increasing length, loosened form, and declining literary merit of Douglass' autobiographical accounts issued in 1855, 1881, and 1892 became a sad index of the wearying struggles and frustrations of his later life.

The content of Douglass' *Narrative* was essentially the same material which he had presented countless times as a roving Abolitionist spokesman. His success as a stump speaker virtually forced its publication. The pressure to publish mounted on two sides — Douglass' relations with his widespread audiences and his relations with his white fellow-workers. In the first instance, he had to establish his credibility; in the second, his independence.

As with so many aspects of life in America for blacks, their participation in the crusade against slavery was largely controlled by white leaders. Even among the Abolitionists there were strong racial prejudices. Douglass said in the mid-1850s: "Opposing slavery and hating its victims has come to be a very common form of abolitionism."[2] The crucial

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[1] Page xix of the Introduction by Benjamin Quarles to the Harvard University Press edition of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge, 1960). The sales statistics are from page xii. All subsequent page references are from this edition.

[2] *Frederick Douglass's Paper,* April 5, 1856. As found in Vol. II, p. 387 of *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* ed. Philip S. Foner (4 vols.), International Publishers (New York, 1950). Hereafter cited as "Foner." See also "The Emancipation of the Negro Abolitionist" by Leon Litwack in *The Anti-Slavery Vanguard,* ed. Martin Duberman (Princeton, 1965), pp. 137-55.

role of blacks in the anti-slavery struggle was generally acknowledged but it was narrowly defined. Blacks were to tell of their first-hand experience in bondage and, by the very act of successful platform presentation, refute the charge that Negroes suffered inherent mental disabilities. In addition, they were a strong drawing card. John A. Collins, general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, told William Lloyd Garrison, "The public have itching ears to hear a colored man speak, and particularly a *slave*. Multitudes will flock to hear one of this class."[3] Frederick Douglass met this need superbly. He became the greatest of the ex-slave orators.

The skill of Douglass' platform performance on tour began to raise doubts. He spoke too well. The sophisticated style and learned tone which he rapidly developed seemed out of character. Collins advised him, "People won't believe you ever were a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way.... Better have a little of the plantation speech than not." Since he did not talk, look, or act like a slave (in the eyes of Northern audiences), Douglass was denounced as an imposter. There could be but one effective rejoinder to this Yankee skepticism.

> In a little less than four years, therefore, after becoming a public lecturer, I was induced to write out the leading facts connected with my experience in slavery, giving the names of persons, places, and dates, thus putting it in the power of any who doubted, to ascertain the truth or falsehood of my story.[4]

Douglass proved that he was not a fake. But the validation of his tales of former bondage opened a direct threat of recapture. Once having fully identified himself, he lost the anonimity which was essential to a fugitive slave. In his introductory letter to Douglass' *Narrative,* Wendell Phillips exclaimed, "The whole armory of Northern Law has no shield for you. I am free to say that, in your place, I should throw the MS. into the fire." (p. 20)

The irony of Douglass' predicament was compounded by events following publication of the manuscript. Since he was not safe in the United States, Douglass sailed for England. For two years he campaigned against slavery, winning friends for himself and his cause throughout the British Isles. As a result, when Douglass returned home early in 1847, he came back to America a free man. His supporters in Britain had raised funds and paid $710.96 to purchase his emancipation from his legal owner in Maryland, thereby scandalizing many Abolitionists who condemned payment for human flesh on any pretext. The popularity of Douglass' *Narrative* contributed much to the success of this scheme. Thus the document which verified his origins in slavery and raised the threat of renewed bondage became the means for achieving his permanent freedom.

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[3] Collins to Garrison, January 18, 1842; quoted in Foner, I, p. 46.
[4] *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,* Collier Books reprint (New York, 1962) of the 1892 revised edition, p. 218.

The second major factor behind the publication of the *Narrative* also involved Douglass' freedom but in a particular and troubling way. It was an attempt to throw off patronizing manipulation by white Abolitionists. The act of putting his life in print must be seen as an assertion of independence from the prescribed routines of his white sponsors. Douglass was grateful to the reformers who helped him to become a prime mover in the anti-slavery cause. He grew restive, however, at the limited role they envisioned for him. Douglass' lack of formal education was an asset consciously exploited by Abolitionists who toured with him. His rough plantation background was a prerequisite to telling the truth about slavery. Hence the uneasiness when he gained in eloquence and range of knowledge as a stump speaker. "Give us the facts," Collins told him. "We will take care of the philosophy." It was boring and demeaning to be kept at the same rudimentary level through countless repetitions. " 'Tell your story, Frederick,' would whisper my reverend friend, Mr. Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always follow the injunction, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were being presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs — I felt like denouncing them." (*Life and Times,* 217) Douglass' white sponsors did not want him to analyze present conditions or try to shape future actions. They were to be the interpreters and prophets — in short, the leaders — and he was merely the showcase specimen of a fugitive slave.

In penning his *Narrative,* Douglass broke this cycle. He jettisoned the obsessive preoccupation with his past life and freed himself for more ambitious work. With that material on the record, he could liberate himself from repeating it, and only it, in future speeches. This was a symbolic gesture of near-defiance, an assertion of independence from a certain kind of psychological and role-playing bondage perpetuated by those whites who were most insistently proclaiming the freedom of Negro Americans. It was also a mark of Douglass' strong self-assurance. This trait later led him to start a black newspaper against the advice of all his white allies and to an acrimonious break with Garrison. Throughout his career, Douglass stubbornly insisted upon the right to "speak just the word that seemed to *me* the word to be spoken *by* me."[5]

However resentful of white paternalism, Douglass remained acutely aware of the audience for whom he was writing. The form and style of the *Narrative* were carefully tailored to persuade and, above all, not to offend a white readership. Only the white majority had the numbers

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[5] *Life and Times,* p. 218. James M. Smith commented in 1855 on Douglass' difficulties with his earliest supporters: "Yet, these gentlemen, although proud of Frederick Douglass, failed to fathom, and bring out to the light of day, the highest qualities of his mind; the force of their own education stood in their own way; they did not delve into the mind of a colored man for capacities which the pride of race led them to believe to be restricted to their own Saxon blood." From Introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom,* Arno Press reprint (New York, 1968) of the 1855 edition issued in New York; p. xxii.

and power to make a difference on the issue of slavery. Douglass therefore had to avoid affronts to the values and prejudices of pious white Northerners. The most conspicuous aspect of form in the *Narrative* designed to allay hostile reaction is the "frame" within which the autobiographical account is placed, a frame provided by two letters of introduction and Douglass' own Appendix.

In putting their work before the American public, many black writers have had to appear in company with a white spokesman to vouch for them. Whether it be William Dean Howells praising Paul Laurence Dunbar or Maxwell Geismar giving the initial testimony for Eldridge Cleaver, a well-known white has given suitable assurances to the audience before permitting an Afro-American to address them. In Douglass' case, there are character references from Garrison and Wendell Phillips, both friends and prominent Abolitionist leaders. What they say — highly complimentary throughout — is less significant than the fact that it was judged necessary that both speak before Douglass' narrative could begin. The aura of paternalism is heightened by Garrison's obvious pride in the success of his protegé.

The Appendix of the *Narrative* is a further effort by Douglass to put his life's story in a safe perspective. The Appendix counters the view that Douglass was too critical of religion. Such an impression would gravely damage the effectiveness of his work. A Garrisonian Abolitionist, he was committed to moral suasion as the way to end slavery. His greatest appeal was to the moral pretentions and guilt feelings of churchly whites in the North. Douglass had to cover himself against the charge that he was ungodly or irreverent. Hence his explanation, "What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper." (p. 155) If the reader accepts this separation, then Douglass can be excused such assertations in the main text as: "For of all the slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst." (p. 110) He was none too cautious, however. He attacked the hypocrisy of "the overwhelming mass of professed Christians in America.... They would be shocked at the proposition of fellowshipping a sheep-stealer; and at the same time they hug to their communion a man-stealer, and brand me an infidel, if I find fault with them for it." (p. 159)

In addition to the Appendix, Douglass appeals to the religious sensibilities of his audience throughout the *Narrative*. He shows his knowledge of the Bible, uses scriptural idiom, and gives suitable professions of his own belief and his incredulity at the perversions of ostensible Christians. Douglass' portrayal of himself as a faithful suffering Christian is part of a careful strategy to expose the sham piety of slave masters, best exemplified in the Sunday School episode. Along with other willing blacks, Douglass was being helped to read the New Testament by a young

white. After three Sundays, a mob led by prominent white Methodists "came upon us with sticks and other missles, drove us off, and forbade us to meet again. Thus ended our little Sabbath school in the pious town of St. Michael's." (p. 85) This event is shrewdly chosen to elicit maximum sympathy and outrage from readers who see eager souls denied an opportunity to study God's Word by self-proclaimed Christians.

In the main part of the *Narrative* Douglass conveys an impression of plain, honest testimony about conditions in slavery. He avoids the stylistic and emotional excesses common in the slave narrative genre. Much of the text is given over to careful explanation of the routines of slave life, an informational service to Northern readers which is more devastating for not becoming a tirade. Through calm control and calculated understatement, Douglass firmly establishes his credibility and heightens the impact of the vivid examples of brutality which he presents at strategic points in the narrative.

In order to emphasize the veracity of his account, Douglass consistently shows slaveholders to be devious and dishonest. Amid so much deceit and self-deception, the narrator stands out as one who can tell the truth. Not only do slavers lie to assuage opinion in the North. They also manipulate their own slaves. Douglass tells how the masters keep down "the spirit of insurrection" by encouraging drunken binges on holidays, "a dose of vicious dissipation, artfully labelled with the name of liberty." (p. 108) Ultimately the trickery and hypocrisy of the slavers renders them incapable of honest self-appraisal. They become moral monsters. Covey is the extreme example. "Every thing he possessed in the shape of learning or religion, he made to conform to his disposition to deceive. He seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty." (p. 93)

The dishonesty of the masters has an ironic counterpart in the dissembling which slaves were forced to employ in their own defense. From the beginning, the idiom and culture of Afro-Americans have been characterized by a spirit of double-entendre. Outward contentment and surface meanings, perennially misread by whites, have often been contradicted by deeper feelings and private symbolism. Slave songs could be used to express pain, despair, and protest. They were safe because whites mistook their often sprightly manner as evidence of happiness among the blacks. They used "words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves." (p. 36) Gradually young Douglass came to understand the symbolism of the songs. "Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains." (p. 37)

The basis of Douglass' effectiveness and credibility as narrator is his plain style. His writing is firm, lucid, and brisk. Sentences are usually simple in construction. The reader encounters a direct, confident narra-

tive voice, unencumbered by elaborate rhetorical devices. Saunders Redding has praised the "stringent simplicity" of Douglass' prose. "In utter contrast to the tortured style of most of the slave biographies, Douglass' style is calm and modest."[6] Alain Locke paid tribute to Douglass' "pithy prose so different from the polished and often florid periods of his orations."[7] Douglass weakened his presentation when he tried to be fancy or elegant. The plain facts of slavery are more moving than the artificial devices (such as personification) which he occasionally uses.

Several passages lapse totally from Douglass' usual plain style. The most important are his description of his dying grandmother and his apostrophe to the white-sailed boats on Chesapeake Bay. In both cases Douglass resorts to inflated rhetoric and pumped-up sentimentality. The scenes are intended to draw tears, just as in the sob-fiction of the period, but the rhetorical strategy of both passages fails on the modern reader. That Douglass was seeking favor with an audience highly susceptible to sentimentality can be inferred from Garrison's praise of the *Narrative* for producing "a tearful eye, a heaving breast, an afflicted spirit." (p. 9) Douglass fares poorly when he approximates the panting, pushy prose of his mentor's high style. Among the many "affecting incidents," Garrison picks out the soliloquy on sail-boats as supreme in its "pathos and sublimity." (p. 11) While on hire to the brutish Covey, Douglass stood on the bank of the Chesapeake Bay one day watching the sails pass by toward the sea.

> Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition.... I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships: —
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> "You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll...." (pp. 95-6)

This is of course strictly a literary performance, one which inadvertently reminds the reader that Douglass composed his account years after the events described.

In the shaping of his account, Douglass plotted the peaks of intense feeling with care. Though the staple of the *Narrative* is calm, detailed exposition, the overall structure of the work resembles popular melodrama. Vivid, artfully staged episodes seek to draw tears, shock, and anger from the reader (*e.g.* a discussion of hypocrisy among Southern Christians is punctuated by a glimpse of a master quoting Scripture

[6] *To Make A Poet Black* (Chapel Hill, 1939), p. 32.
[7] Foreward to the Centenary Memorial Subscriber's Edition of Douglass' *Life and Times* (New York, 1941), p. xix.

while he lashes the naked shoulders of a crippled black girl). Douglass knew he was competing with hosts of slave narratives, real and invented, which catered to a public taste for the sensational. To his credit, he largely refrained from cheap tricks to elicit emotional responses but one must observe that Douglass appealed to the same elements in popular taste.

Autobiography, especially in America, usually describes the making of a man. Douglass' *Narrative* tells such a story in an unusually profound and literal way. The central movement of the book is a process of liberation. There are two essential components in this process — literacy, to gain awareness of his selfhood; and resistance, to assert his manhood. Paradoxically, Douglass had to liberate himself psychologically before he could attempt to become free. He began, however, with nothing.

Most autobiographies open with a birth date and a description of the author's parentage. Douglass can supply neither. His story opens in the limbo of bondage, the anonymity of the slave. Virtually a motherless child, as in the old spiritual, he saw his mother only a few times in the middle of the night. She died when he was seven. Douglass' father was white, but he never knew which among the slavers it might be. Progeny of the oppressers, lacking any roots or identity, how could young Douglass know or say who he was? His very name was given him by a white master. Nor should one underestimate the power of slavery to dehumanize its subjects.

> I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason.... He must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man. (p. 133)

Out of this nothingness, this non-identity, Douglass must forge his own character and sense of himself.

Early in his life Douglass realized that ignorance was a precondition of his bondage. As a bright eight-year-old in Baltimore, he began to learn his A B C's from Mrs. Auld. Her husband put a stop to such dangerous nonsense. "A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master — to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world." (p. 58) He added that if Douglass learned to read, "it would forever unfit him to be a slave." This information awakened young Frederick. "I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty — to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man." Henceforth he knew where he must apply himself if he were to be free.

Over the next seven years, slowly and painfully, Douglass learned to read and write. He had to accomplish the task by subterfuge since he was spied upon to prevent just such self-education. He stole bread and

traded it for bits of knowledge from white street urchins. He picked up letters of the alphabet from marks on timbers in the shipyard. He practiced his handwriting between the lines of young Thomas Auld's discarded copy books. Douglass was especially keen to learn about any subject which was condemned by the whites. Thus, he gradually came to understand the meaning of "abolitionist" far beyond its dictionary definition. The struggle for literacy, for command over the power of words, was the first stage of his escape from oppression. Without the power of language and the self-affirmation which it opened to him, Douglass might not have been able to survive and to sustain his will to escape.

If literacy and self-awareness represent the crucial first step in Douglass' liberation, then active resistance was the next stage in securing his freedom. The imaginative creation of a self in opposition to slavery was a gesture which prefigured his escape. The turning-point of the *Narrative* comes in his fight with the "nigger-breaker" Covey, a cunning and ruthless master who constantly harassed and beat the blacks on hire to him. "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit." (pp. 94-5) This is the nadir of the *Narrative.* Douglass was ready to kill himself. After collapsing from overwork and another beating, he fled to his old master for redress, only to be forced back to Covey's farm. The following morning, Covey grabbed Douglass unawares and tried to tie him up so that he could be whipped.

> I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and, as I did so, I rose.... My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. (p. 103)

Though a slave could expect severe punishment for violence against his master, Douglass fought Covey to a draw. Despite being mauled, Covey claimed victory and took no reprisal. He had to protect his reputation as a tough overseer of fractious blacks. As indicated by the imagery of ascendency and renewal which surrounds the fight, it was a moment of deliverance for Douglass.

> This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood.... I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. (pp. 104-05).

Through resistance, the assertion of an internalized liberation, Douglass ended the psychological power of slavery over his life. Thereafter it was only a matter of time and opportunity until he would strike for true freedom.

The *Narrative* leaves the actual break from bondage a cryptic and mysterious transit from Baltimore to New York in 1838. By giving no

details of what otherwise would be the climax of the story, more emphasis is thrown back on the consequences of Douglass' fight with Covey and the mental attitudes required for such a flight. There were powerful reasons for not being more explicit about his means of escape. Douglass did not want to compromise those who had helped him, nor prevent other fugitive slaves from following the same route. He criticized successful escapees for boasting of their runaway techniques, thereby reducing the chances of later fugitives. A further though less compelling factor in withholding the manner of Douglass' flight to the North was its anticlimactic character. It hardly matched the powerful thematic and structural build-up through the rest of the *Narrative.* Douglass himself said that he would have revealed the secret sooner, "had there been anything very heroic or thrilling in the incidents connected with my escape."[8] In 1873 he finally explained how he had ridden North on the railroad out of Baltimore posing as a sailor with "free papers" borrowed from a black seaman who somewhat resembled him.

My Bondage and My Freedom is more than a mere extension of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* Major changes in style and structure highlight by comparison the merits of the earlier, shorter version of Douglass' autobiography. The account published in 1855 is longer and more informative. It may provide a better historical and social record but it also represents a distinctly poorer literary performance.[9]

The basic format of *My Bondage and My Freedom* is a division of Douglass' story into contrasting halves — his experience prior to escape and his career as an anti-slavery activist in the North. The continuity and cohesiveness, the mounting of symbolism and suspense in the *Narrative* is negated by the broken-backed form adopted in the 1855 version. Douglass is still the spokesman of a great and unresolved issue. The high moral crusade to which he calls the reader still lends a certain force and drive to his narration. But it is diffused and attenuated by an enormously loosened sense of structure and stylistic control. Nothing is taut and

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[8] *Life and Times* (Collier Books Edition), p. 197.

[9] This essay was originally prepared before the publication of Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography* (University of Massachusetts Press; Amherst, 1974) with its able analysis and discussion of Douglass' autobiographies. He makes a number of similar observations concerning theme and technique but differs with my judgment that the *Narrative* is the best-written of Douglass' successive texts. Butterfield echoes my suggestion that the later autobiographies become less crisp and more subdued, moving from "the immediate polemics of a living movement" to versions with "a more reflective tone" which "are meant to stand as history," (pp. 65-6). He does not, however, see *My Bondage and My Freedom* and especially *Life and Times* as looser, more verbose and sprawling, often blunting the edge of Douglass' earlier moral intensity and critique (see p. 77). Butterfield sees instead "maturity and development in the handling" of important features of Douglass' style, a mastering of antithesis and the ability to match it "perfectly to the tone and content of whatever he wished to say," (pp. 70-71). He does not comment upon such scenes as Douglass' amicable conversation with his former master or the effect of Douglass' political allegiance to Gilded Age Republicanism. Butterfield also obeserves, however, that Douglass' literary style was shaped by his long career in public advocacy and dispute — "and in the kind of writing it demands: oratory, polemics, persuasion, letters, articles, and propaganda," (p. 76). Despite the strengths he finds in the later writings of Douglass, Butterfield acknowledges that "the disadvantage of the style is that it must rely, for persuasion, on public formulas and so tends to slip into stock phrases and bombast." (p. 88).

crisp. The increased length of *My Bondage and My Freedom* is due not only to new sections covering the decade of Douglass' life since the appearance of his first autobiography. The old material from the *Narrative* is stretched out and padded with anecdotes and verbiage which clog the narrative flow.

The moment one begins to read Douglass' 1855 account, the stylistic contrast is evident. The text is more leisurely and wordy. Its pace lags. The first chapter is slow and rambling. There is no punch to it, no strong closing comparable to the whipping scene which concludes the first chapter in the 1845 version. That traumatic episode appears in the fifth chapter, after fifty pages instead of five. The author's style in *My Bondage and My Freedom* has become flabby. Gone is the terseness so appropriate to describing life under the hardships of bondage. Sentence structure is often complex and sloppy. Puffy rhetoric weakens the impact of the slave scenes. Chummy asides to "my dear reader" further dilute the earlier tone of cold scorn and righteous anger toward slavery and its masters.

One hesitates to differ with so eminent a commentator as Saunders Redding, who has judged Douglass' performance in 1855 superior to that of 1845 and who finds a "surer" style in the later work, but comparison of the texts makes clear that Douglass wrote with less crispness and discipline in his second autobiography.[10] The following parallel passages illustrate the process of stylistic inflation at work.

> *Narrative of the Life* (1845)
> I had not gone far before my little strength failed me. I could go no farther. I fell down, and lay for a considerable time. The blood was yet oozing from the wound on my head. For a time I thought I should bleed to death; and think now that I should have done so, but that the blood so matted my hair as to stop the wound. (p. 99)
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> *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)
> But I had not gone far, before my little strength again failed me, and I laid down. The blood was still oozing from the wound in my head; and, for a time, I suffered more than I can describe. There I was, in the deep woods, sick and emaciated, pursued by a wretch whose character for revolting cruelty beggars all opprobrious speech — bleeding and almost bloodless. I was not without the fear of bleeding to death. The thought of dying in the woods, all alone, and of being torn to pieces by the buzzards, had not yet been rendered tolerable by my many troubles and hardships, and I was glad when the shade of the trees, and the cool evening breeze, combined with my matted hair to stop the flow of blood. (pp. 227-28)

Any style which protests its own inadequacy so insistently, as Douglass does in the second extract, can hardly impress the reader with its sureness and control. The 1855 verion takes nearly twice as many words to cover the same ground. The elaborate diction and syntax of the latter

[10] *To Make A Poet Black*, p. 35.

passage, coupled with its manipulative appeals to sentiment, are characteristic of Douglass' swelling style in the 1850s. They helped to make him a great orator but they become a liability in simple prose narration.

There are marks of haste in the composition of *My Bondage and My Freedom* which flaw the form of the book. While the section on slave experience is padded and verbose (*e.g.* the fight with Covey loses its sharp decisiveness), the coverage of Douglass' career in the North is choppy and fragmented. One surmises that it was assembled rapidly out of available materials. Portions of letters, speeches, and extracts from the press are incorporated into the text. Episodes are strung together without much continuity. Following the rather brief chapters on his life between 1845 and 1855, eight of Douglass' best public statements from that decade are reprinted. The content is valuable but the form of the autobiography has virtually disintegrated.

Twenty-six years passed before Douglass issued another version of his life's story. He rewrote the last sections of *My Bondage and My Freedom* and added much new material to cover the intervening period. Comparative looseness in both style and structure is more apparent than ever in the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,* first published in 1881. More than a hundred pages were added to an expanded edition issued in 1892. Two aspects of Douglass' last book are of interest to the discussion of literary merit among his various autobiographies. One is the retrospective, anticlimactic cast to the work. The other is the symbolic relationship between its form and the pattern of Douglass' whole life.

Douglass' *Life and Times* suffers from being an example of the fat volume of memoirs that public men so often produce at the end of a busy career. The bulk and weight of the narrative are made heavier by the retrospective and funereal mood which pervades the text. The author is looking back, not forward. There is no last triumph or peak in his life. Instead there is only the inevitable point at which it finally runs out. The great moments of Douglass' story came relatively early. He recognized this mid-way through *Life and Times.*

> My great and exceeding joy over these stupendous achievements, especially over the abolition of slavery (which had been the deepest desire and the great labor of my life), was slightly tinged with a feeling of sadness.
> I felt that I had reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life. (p. 373)

Most of the rest is anti-climax, however interesting and valuable to the history of black men in America. It may be unfair to Douglass' notable and energetic labors but his account of the post-war decades often becomes a slow-paced farewell address. Most of his old friends (and enemies) are dead. There are profuse tributes and eulogies for his comrades-in-arms from the bright, distant, early years when the struggle against slavery was a dangerous adventure. The tone and thrust of his

Narrative partake of that early excitement, anger, and expectation. Nothing remains to look forward to in *Life and Times*. The battles are over and an old warrior seeks rest.

Reconciliation replaces partisan fervor and moral outrage as the dominant note in the narrative. The reader encounters an extraordinary scene when the aged Frederick Douglass, then United States Marshall for the District of Columbia, goes back after fifty-six years to revisit the plantation where he grew up a slave. He returns at the invitation of his old master, Thomas Auld, with whom he holds a friendly conversation as the ex-slaver lies on his death-bed. No enmity remains. The brutal reality of slavery, so insistent in the opening pages of the book, has faded away, as has the tough, truth-telling prose which makes Douglass' presentation in his *Narrative* so impressive and compelling.

The symbolic parallels between the telling of Douglass' life and the living of it are stronger in *Life and Times* than in previous accounts. The cluttered and fragmentary narrative mirrors the crammed schedule and frequent travel of his public career. Chunks of speeches, articles, and letters fill the text, specimens of his handiwork from the years under review. After such long and difficult efforts to improve the situation of Afro-Americans, Douglass cannot close with a report of wide success. Though emancipated, blacks at the end of the century remained unequal and were losing ground. The country no longer responded to crusades on behalf of Negroes. Whites ignored Douglass, who seemed an anachronism. *Life and Times* did not sell well. Its publishers told Douglass in 1889 that, though they had "pushed and repushed" the book, sales had been poor since "interest in the days of slavery was not as great as we expected."[11] The failure of *Life and Times*, both in its appeal to the public and in its uncertain, faltering form, duplicated the frustration and inconclusiveness of Douglass' struggles in 1880s and 1890s when America broke its promises to the ex-slaves and tried to forget about its racial problems.

In personal terms, Douglass rose in status and fortune through the last years of his life. He received patronage jobs in return for political services rendered. Inevitably, in recounting this personal success, an annoying note of self-gratulation spreads through his narration. Much of Douglass' advancement was due to his fierce, unquestioning loyalty to the Republican Party. He insisted that the party was the deck, all else was the sea. Election after election, Douglass took the stump on behalf of the Republicans. He clung to Grant and the Stalwarts despite scandals and independent reform movements. (He wanted a third term for Grant!) Douglass backed the grab for Santo Domingo even when his good friend Sumner condemned it. In return, Douglass was appointed to the President's Commission which visited the island. It is sad to see the

[11] Quoted by Quarles, Introduction to *Narrative*, p. xv.

brave Abolitionist and bold reformer reduced to a party wheel-horse, and for such a party as the Republicans in the Gilded Age. This devotion to partisan politics gives the latter part of Douglass' *Life and Times* much the same flavor as the memoirs of party leaders like James Blaine or John Sherman. The moral appeal and personal integrity so evident during the anti-slavery fight are obscured and the author's good character seems diminished.

More damaging than Douglass' political activity is the degree to which he absorbed and expounded the philosophy of the triumphant Republican Party. He echoed the businessman's laissez-faire ethos all too readily. It was not by accident that Douglass' most popular lecture was called "Self-Made Men." As he noted in *Life and Times,* "I have sometimes been credited with having been the architect of my own fortune, and have pretty generally received the title of 'self-made man.'" (p. 466) In a manner remarkably similar to Booker T. Washington, he argued for self-help and vocational training, seeming to belittle the role of governmental protection for the rights of Afro-Americans. The concluding paragraphs of his 1881 text are a homily on success, stressing the familiar Puritan virtues. "I have urged upon them self-reliance, self-respect, industry, perseverence, and economy." (p. 480) Little wonder that Alain Locke described *Life and Times* as "a sort of Negro edition of Ben Franklin."[12] Douglass' subservience to commercial and Republican ideals was denounced toward the end of his life by young blacks who harked back to the candor and scorn of his early years. As a Harvard graduate student in 1891, W. E. B. DuBois deplored the cowardice of current Negro leadership, including Douglass. He charged that blacks had only a "time-server for our Moses and a temporizer who is afraid to call a lie a lie."[13]

Is Frederick Douglass' life best seen as a darker version of the traditional American success story? Or was DuBois right to criticize the misleading emphasis on personal aggrandizement and material satisfaction which arises from the rags-to-riches myth? The contest over the emblematic value of Douglass' career is central to any interpretation of him. With encouragement from his *Life and Times,* many commentators have chosen to puff Douglass' achievements in rising from humble origins to a high station in public life. Saunders Redding calls the third autobiography "the most American of American life stories. . . . The story develops the dramatic theme from bondage to the council tables of a great nation."[14] Rayford Logan goes further; Douglass became

> . . . advisor to President Lincoln and the diplomatic representative of the United States to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Hence, this narrative of his life has inspired Negroes and other disadvantaged

[12] Quoted by Quarles, Introduction to *Narrative,* p. xix.
[13] Quoted from page 20 of Francis Broderick's *W.E.B. DuBois* (Stanford, 1959). DuBois wrote a poem of tribute to Douglass when he died in 1895.
[14] *To Make A Poet Black,* p. 37. James McPherson has said of Douglass, "the story of his life could almost have been written by a black Horatio Alger." Preface to Atheneum edition of Benjamin Quarles's *Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1968), p. v.

> Americans to believe that, despite the imperfections of American democracy, a self-made man may aspire to greatness.[15]

Here is precisely the danger of such an interpretation. Douglass' life cannot be permitted to serve as just another encomium to the virtue and upward mobility of American society. Harder truths and grimmer lessons are to be seen in it.

There is also a nobler theme, a more universal meaning to the best of Douglass' autobiographical writing. Alain Locke said of his career and character that they "take on more and more the structure and significance of the epical."[16] The success motif lies deep in Douglass' example but it is best embodied in the earliest impulse of his life. Just as his compact escape narrative is far better written than any of its sprawling successors, so the truest epic for Frederick Douglass is not to see him as a black Horatio Alger hero but as a splendid enactment of man's perennial struggle to be free.

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[15] Introduction to Collier edition, *Life and Times*, p. 15.
[16] Foreward to *Life and Times* (Pathway Press edition), p. xv.