THE MANY LIVES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

That we live in a decadent age will seem evident to anyone who has been numbed by the moral horrors that occur on a daily basis, all over this country, and that are reported with a bland reportorial neutrality by all the news media. These horrors--involving open drug-dealing and prostitution, shootings in the schools, fetal abortions, doctor--assisted suicides--evoke hardly more than a shrug. Passivity in the face of such evils is in fact nowadays admired as evidence of "openmindedness," "compassion," and "tolerance" for differing "values" and "behaviors." In fact, to believe that evil is a reality and to have strong convictions about how to deal with the forms that evil takes in the national life is usually to be dismissed as an absolutist, a crank, and a bigot. Public moralists are a nuisance and we usually do not like to listen to them. I am therefore led to wonder whether, if this were the nineteenth century, we would be capable of recognizing, as evil, something so huge and monstrous as the institution of slavery. Probably not.

In any case, such reflections on the ubiquity of evil and the too human readiness to deny it--even when its grotesque visage is mirrored in the lines of one's face--occur to me as a result of rereading the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. This tragic and truly extraordinary black American had the bad fortune to be born a slave, near Tuckahoe Creek, Maryland, in 1818. For most Americans in the early years of the Republic, it was perfectly "natural" that an "inferior race," like the blacks, should be enslaved to the "superior whites." After all, the Founding Fathers, in their constitutional wisdom, had--for all their declarations about born equality--provided the "natural law" of slavery with many American legal and political protections. And these constitutional guarantees to slavery were long supported by many of the other institutions of Northern and Southern society--the Protestant churches, the universities, the press, the "intellectual community," and the vast majority of just plain folks like you and me. Slavery an evil? Hardly. Only insolent blacks and the Northern religious right (Yankee moral cranks) thought so. But in the light of the highest ethical principles, they and a few others had it right.

The author of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845) was one of those "insolent" blacks whose account of slavery made inescapably plain to many of his contemporaries that...
this "peculiar institution" was in fact a socially organized manifestation of Evil. While nearly everyone with the capacity of moral reason recognizes this now, few enough did in the 1830s, when Douglass ran away from his owner. But the publication of this autobiography—in conjunction with many other kinds of abolitionist activism by Douglass and others—eventually moved many Northerners and some Southerners to agree with Lincoln's decision to publish the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The Narrative is thus a major document in the racial, social, and political history of the nation. Its historical importance aside, however, it is also the best of the American slave autobiographies—a work of extraordinary psychological, moral, and literary importance.

How splendid it is, then, to have the Narrative available in a newly prepared edition in the Library of America series. And not just this Narrative but also Douglass's subsequent autobiographical writings—the volumes My Bondage and My Freedom (1855) and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881; revised 1892). [1] These autobiographies constitute a remarkable unfolding account of the life of an exceptional black American. The first takes him from slavery in the South to freedom in the North; the second from servile anonymity to worldwide renown as the most powerful black abolitionist orator in the world; and the third autobiography expands these earlier accounts in taking him through the Civil War and the triumph of black emancipation to great personal celebrity, high government office, and international fame—even as America was relapsing into Jim Crow laws, resegregation, and what Mark Twain was to call "The United States of Lyncherdom" Douglass's was a remarkable life. His narrative of that life was likewise remarkable in its moral vision, social judgment, and psychological power.

Born in 1818 the son of Harriet Bailey, Douglass never knew who had fathered him. He was thus named Frederick Bailey. He was rumored to be the son of his mother's master, the white man Aaron Anthony, who worked as the general overseer of the immensely wealthy planter Edward Lloyd, who owned five hundred slaves and thirteen farms in Talbot County, Maryland. Separated from his mother at the end of his first year, Douglass was reared by his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, while his mother was sent back to the fields. Then at the age of six he was removed from his grandmother's cabin and taken to live on the Lloyd plantation on the Wye River. He was befriended by the twenty-year-old white woman Lucretia Anthony Auld, wife of Thomas Auld. She was, quite possibly, whether she knew it or not, his half-sister. In any case, the lightskinned Douglass was made the companion of Daniel Lloyd, the twelve-year-old son of the white master, and had the run of the planter's "Great House." The two boys were inseparable and came to love each other; and Douglass must have fantasized about his likewise being the son of the rich man Edward Lloyd. But no one stepped forward to enlighten Frederick about his father; and when he was seven or eight his mother—who might have told him—died unexpectedly; in all he had seen her, briefly, only four or five times. Shortly afterward, he was told that he was no longer needed for Daniel.

Because he was a favorite of Lucretia Auld, Douglass was sent to Baltimore in 1826 to live with her brother-in-law, Hugh Auld, a ship carpenter, and his wife, Sophia. Now, at age eight, Douglass was to be the companion of the Aulds' infant son, Tommy. Life in Baltimore was much safer than on the plantation; there was more food to eat; Douglass had a bed of his own for the first time; and Sophia Auld's kindness melted him. Life for a slave, however, was never secure. His master, Aaron Anthony, died almost immediately, and his daughter Lucretia, who had taught and protected him, died the next year. Such turning points were often catastrophic for the slaves. Their families were often broken up and individuals were sold and dispersed, sometimes into the deep South, in the cotton states, where agricultural life was much harder. Aaron had in fact sold a number of the boy's relatives to deep South planters.
Douglass was inherited by Thomas Auld, Lucretia's widower. At the moment he did not want the boy, but instead of selling him off, Thomas Auld luckily returned young Douglass to the Hugh Aulds in Baltimore.

Douglass remarks in the Narrative that soon after he went to live with the kindly Sophia Auld, she began to teach him the ABCS. But Hugh put his foot down, reprimanding his wife that

"If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. 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. Now,' said he, "if you teach that nigger [Hugh is here speaking of Douglass] how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy"

These words were a revelation to young Douglass of how the white man had managed to enslave the black. From that moment on, literacy represented for Douglass "the pathway from slavery to freedom"; and, during the next seven years while he lived with the Hugh Aulds, the passion to read and write became all-consuming. Douglass "appropriated" little Tommy's copy books and readers, "borrowed" the Webster's speller, and got white youngsters on the street to show him how the letters were made. He got into a Bible study group at the Bethel A. M. E. church in Baltimore in order to read further, and he bought and devoured a used copy of The Colombian Orator (1797), a well-known collection of prize speeches. He memorized long passages from Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Caleb gingham, and other great orators. Some of the speeches dealt with slavery and emancipation from oppression.

The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity.

This burning self-consciousness of his servile condition ate upon his soul, alienated and embittered him, but what could the child do? From time to time young Douglass had heard sinister things about Northern abolitionists; they piqued his curiosity, and he vowed to learn more about them.

In 1832, at age fourteen, Douglass was summarily returned to his owner, Captain Thomas Auld, who was still living back in Talbot County. This was a disastrous development, inasmuch as Auld was a cruel, cowardly, and inconsistent master who did not care for his slaves or feed them enough. Throughout both the Narrative and My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass relentlessly condemned Thomas Auld as an evil, mean-spirited master who was the embodiment of the evil of slavery as such and the incarnation of all irreligion. Here is Douglass on Captain Auld, after Auld's conversion at a Methodist camp meeting:
I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture--"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes"

Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cubing her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. The secret of master's cruelty toward "Henry" is found in the fact of her being almost helpless.

All slaves were more or less helpless, but Henny's hands had been injured in a horrible fire and she was unable to work fast and efficiently. Pornography was taboo in the nineteenth century, but something like soft porn was allowable in the description of the whipping of these female slaves. The point was twofold. In whipping, these masters were not merely brutal monsters. We are to understand the whippings as an elaborate displacement of the sexual degradation of these vulnerable women slaves, mixed in, as it was, with sadistic sexual impulses. Since Auld's conversion seemed to have made him even more ruthless, Douglass turned against Christianity, became a cold rationalist, and put his seething anger and calculating rationalism to the service of destroying the institution that had enslaved him.

Witnessing such whippings made Douglass "insolent" and obstreperous; he often spoke out of turn and was frequently whipped himself for his troubles. Eventually Auld determined to punish Douglass by renting him out as a field hand to Edward Covey, a well-known local "rigger-breaker" And at Covey's farm, over a period of several months, Douglass was beaten so often that he finally snapped. "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me," he wrote:

I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!

Douglass ran away, back to Auld's farm, and begged his master to hire him out to an other. But Auld refused and ordered Douglass back to Covey's farm.

One of the most interesting passages in the Narrative concerns Covey's attempt, three days later, to get revenge by whipping Douglass, and the ensuing fistfight with the sixteen-year-old boy. Douglass by this time had grown tall, muscular, and strong. He had been beaten many times, but this time he did not intend to be whipped again. Covey did not expect a fight and got more than he could handle: Douglass drew blood and bested him. For that the slave might have been killed then or later; he might have been sold downriver to the cotton states. But strangely enough, after being beaten by the boy, Covey left him alone; he growled and threatened but he did not try to whip him again, and the slave rental agreement expired at the end of the year. The effect of the fistfight was that Douglass's self-confidence returned, his spirits rose, and he decided to gain his freedom by escaping. This he finally tried with five other slaves in 1836, but he was betrayed by one of his own and jailed in Easton. Thomas Auld kept him from being lynched by telling the jailers that he was retrieving Douglass in order to sell him to a slaveholder in Alabama. But then, inexplicably, he sent Douglass back to the Hugh Aulds in Baltimore to learn a trade.

The situation of blacks in Baltimore at the time Douglass returned to live there was a confusing matter. Perhaps only 20 percent of the population--some twenty-five thousand people--were black; but of these perhaps three fourths of the blacks were free, having been manumitted by their owners or been born to
free parents of color. Blacks therefore came and went without much or any white supervision. A number of the blacks who remained slaves were, like Frederick Douglass, apprenticed out to learn a trade. After serving his apprenticeship as a caulker in a shipyard, Douglass in fact was allowed to hire himself out and to board where he chose, although he was obliged, once a week, to surrender most of his wages to Hugh Auld. Once he had mastered his trade and saved enough money, Douglass, in these loosened circumstances, planned his escape. In 1838, at age twenty, he went underground, headed north, evaded the prowling slave-catchers and bounty hunters, and made his way to freedom in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

One might expect that the story of the actual escape would be the centerpiece of the Narrative, but in fact Douglass gives it short shrift. We must remember that in 1845, when the autobiography was published, Douglass was still a fugitive vulnerable to arrest at any time and susceptible to a forced return to his Maryland owner. Hence, he did not identify his relatives or masters by name, nor did he disclose his way stations northward on the journey to freedom.[2] In fact, when he arrived in New Bedford, he was traveling under the name of Stanley; but he and his new bride, Anna Murray, set up as the Fred Johnsons. But his local contact was a Nathan Johnson, who told him that there were already too many black Johnsons in New Bedford and that another name would be preferable.

What's in a name? The slave has nothing but his body, his labor, and his name. Some slaves had secret African names, but Douglass did not. He had been born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey but had himself dropped the middle names. Yet in running away, this slave Fred Bailey had had to renounce his name, his patronymic (or rather matronymic), in order to become par excellence an actor, an imposter, and a confidence man all rolled into one. By pulling up stakes, moving to a new location, and changing his identity, this slave had begun to participate in what has always been a very distinctively American rite d'identite. Douglass reports that

I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of "Frederick" I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity. Mr. Johnson had just been reading the "Lady of the Lake," and at once suggested that my name be " Douglass " From that time until now I have been called "Frederick Douglass;" and as I am more widely known by that name than by either of the others, I shall continue to use it as my own.[3]

There is perhaps another reason that this newly named Douglass gave the actual escape such scant treatment in the first two narratives. A dose reading of the two prewar autobiographies suggests that Douglass’s essential emancipation had in fact already occurred four years earlier, at age sixteen, after that fistfight with Edward Covey, the "rigger-breaker." "This battle with Mr. Covey," Douglass wrote in the Narrative

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. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.... It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and 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. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

This is a remarkable redefinition of the meaning of freedom. Here freedom is equated with the mere possession of one's ownmost spirit, with psychological self-confidence, and with autonomous interior
selfhood. Freedom is not so much a matter of who controls one's body as who has control of the soul. As such, this definition of liberty is not unlike the Stoicism of the philosopher-slave Epictetus, to whom the imprisoned and enslaved, in many nations, have oft turned for consolation.

Nor is this definition of freedom alien to one strand of Christian thought, which sees us all as slaves to the body, to the appetites, and to perversions of the will. (Under this conviction, St. Paul could counsel patience and obedience to one's masters, in the expectation of eventual heavenly deliverance.) After 1845 Douglass appears to have sensed the extremity of this subjective definition of freedom and so backed off from it in the 1881 Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. There he writes: "I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I was a man now. It . . . inspired me with renewed determination to be a free man." He wrote that he was resurrected from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom. I was no longer a servile coward, trembling under the frown of a brother worm of the dust, but my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of independence. I had reached the point at which I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a freeman in fact, though I still remained a slave in form. When a slave cannot be flogged, he is more than half free. He has a domain as broad as his own manly heart to defend, and he is really "a power on earth ."

One likes the adjective in "comparative freedom," but it is followed by a recourse to considerations of form and fact and to percentages of liberty that do not add up in my own calculations. Still, the point seems preserved, even in Douglass's final and more florid 1881 figure: the essence of freedom is always a condition of the heart.

Between 1838 and 1841 Douglass supported his family by unskilled labor--sawing wood, shoveling coal, and loading ships. (The white New Bedford shipyard workers would not tolerate a black caulker.) Yet he was now reading The Liberator, attending speeches by William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, and occasionally speaking himself from the pulpit of the local Zion Methodist Church. In 1841, at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society convention in Nantucket, Douglass was invited to describe his life as a slave. The performance was electrifying and so enthusiastically received that he was hired by the Society to be its general agent and to tour the country--with Garrison, Phillips, Abby Kelley, Stephen S. Foster, Parker Pillsbury, and other radical abolitionists--advocating the nonviolent emancipation of blacks, their civil equality, and their right to live in America (rather than suffering exile to a distant black colony). In 1845, he published the Narrative and, because he disclosed his true identity, movement leaders deemed it prudent to send him on a lecture tour to Great Britain, where, during the following two years, he was an immense success.

While abroad, some of his English friends (notably, Anna and Ellen Richardson and John Bright) negotiated with the Aulds to secure his freedom--thus initiating the first of many great public furors over Frederick Douglass. Hugh Auld, who in 1846 had bought Douglass for $100 from his brother, agreed to free Douglass in return for £150. After Douglass secured his freedom in this way there was an immense outcry, many purists arguing that the English anti-slavery radicals had trafficked with--and indeed enriched the coffers of--the hated slave power. But Douglass and his friends justified the negotiation on the ground that Douglass had not been purchased by the English. Instead, for a consideration, Hugh Auld had merely agreed to manumit him. The irony in all of this is that some of the abolitionists would have preferred Douglass to remain a fugitive slave.
Back in America in 1847, a free man, Douglass resumed lecturing and touring the country. But he was becoming restless with the tight controls placed on him by Garrison and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He wanted to edit his own abolitionist newspaper, but the Society had other ideas. They wanted to use and control him, to employ his talents for their own programs and purposes. But Douglass, who already had a reputation for being uppity, was his own man. And it was with some irritation that the Garrison abolitionists finally acceded to Douglass's moving Anna and his household to Rochester in 1848, where he commenced his own radical newspaper, the North Star, a competitor with The Liberator. We know next to nothing, incidentally, about Anna's response to these matters because she was very withdrawn and did not participate in movement activities. All the evidence points to her being illiterate, and, despite many unsuccessful efforts to teach her to read, she was apparently of little public value to her husband in his career.

The Garrisonians did not like the North Star, but they were frankly appalled by developing events in Douglass's personal life. He had brought to America and installed in his own house the white radical Julia Griffiths, who was a member of the English anti-slavery movement. She was to serve as his business manager for the North Star, but there seems no reason to doubt that she was also his mistress, living in the same household with the illiterate Anna and their five children. None of these relationships is clarified in the autobiographies; in fact, Douglass was wonderfully reticent about his courtship of Anna, their marriage, and his own sexually. But what seems unmistakable is that many women, of both races, found Frederick Douglass sexually attractive.

Douglass was a remarkably tall, muscular, and handsome young man with thick, black, curly hair, a pair of piercing eyes, a straight nose, thin and well-formed lips, a musical voice, and a light mulatto complexion—-a combination that melted hearts on two continents. In addition, he was the brightest and most articulate slave ever to have joined the movement, almost too talented and exceptional to be believed. Some were so struck with his talents that they doubted that he had ever been a slave. Many did not believe that Douglass himself had written the 1845 Narrative. Since most slave narratives were dictated or ghost-written, Douglass's is preceded by the usual "Attestation" of its authenticity: two stirring prefacles—one by Garrison, the other by Wendell Phillips—confirming that, yes, Douglass was really a black slave and, yes, he had written the work himself. (In subsequent editions, these were replaced with introductions by black friends.)

Douglass's mixed blood, light complexion, and sexual charisma were a problem for many abolitionists, black and white. The Englishman Thomas Clarkson worried: "I wish he were full blood black for I fear pro-slavery people will attribute his preeminent abilities to the white blood that is in his veins " And so some of them did. Douglass, whose identity was securely that of a black man, wrote back comically from England that "I am hardly black enough for the british taste, but by keeping my hair as wooly as possible—-I make out to pass for at least a half a negro at any rate" But the argument about the source of his talent went on and on. In the preface to My Bondage and My Freedom, the black James M'Cune Smith undertook to answer in print whether "Mr. Douglass's power [was] inherited from the Negroid, or from what is called the Caucasian side of his makeup"—only to conclude, naturally enough, that "for his energy, perseverance, eloquence, invective, sagacity, and wide sympathy, he is indebted to his negro blood" William S. McFeely, in his excellent biography, Frederick Douglass (1991), has reported some of the other wonderful but paradoxical responses to this remarkable slave:

One of Douglass's Dublin admirers had a somewhat different slant on the problem: "Faith, an' if half a Naigar can make a speech like that, what could a whole Naigar do?" At least one American knew the
In any case, Douglass the man attracted quite a number of radical groupies in England and America; and, in Julia Griffiths, he had brought one of them home to live with him in Rochester. As Douglass was by this time too well-known, popular, and successful to be controlled by the white antislavery establishment, he thought that he could weather the sexual scandal. But, with even The Liberator publicly critical of this menage, the pressure became too much and in 1855 Julia Griffiths returned to England.[4]

In Douglass's eyes, the Garrisonians were coming to seem more and more irrelevant to American political developments. Garrison and the Liberator group saw the Constitution as an evil document that enshrined and protected slavery. Any participation in American politics was therefore corrupt and immoral. Some abolitionists wanted the North to secede from the South and its slave-defending federal government; others wanted Massachusetts to secede from the Union; the most radical of the Garrisonians even wanted Essex County to secede from Massachusetts. A long train of events had convinced Douglass that this hostility to the political process had not achieved any positive results. So in 1853 he threw in his lot with Gerrit Smith, merged his North Star with Smith's Liberty Party Paper so as to produce a new journal (Frederick Douglass' Paper), joined in with many others in an open political dialogue, and so provoked a bitter break with Garrison and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

Douglas's activities thenceforward, until the outbreak of the Civil War, are what might have been expected from an ardent abolitionist. He continued to tour the country giving lectures on anti-slavery and urging other liberal causes in the "Sisterhood of Reforms" (Northern desegregation, temperance, antivivisectionism, female suffrage, more generous labor laws). Very often Douglass and his fellow speakers were heckled and shouted down, set upon by mobs, or beaten by racist thugs. Nevertheless, courageously, he persisted in his calling. In 1855, he published the second version of his autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom, and urged the nascent Republican Party to become the party of abolition. He knew and supported John Brown in his assisting escaped slaves to reach Canada. But when in 1859 Brown told him of the plan to assault the Harpers Ferry Arsenal and to arm the slaves for an insurrection, Douglass knew that his friend had gone round the bend and declined to participate in the raid. Brown's confiscated papers mentioned the name of Douglass, and a request for his arrest was issued. This led Douglass to take an immediate unplanned voyage to Europe, where he met up with Ottilia Assing, and, on the lecture circuit he acclaimed, from afar, the martyrdom of John Brown.

When it was safe to do so, Douglass returned to America to support Lincoln for president. This was in 1860. Lincoln's opponent, that other Douglas-Stephen-had shrewdly foreseen, in the Second Debate in 1858, how a vote for Lincoln would result in the social equality of blacks; and Frederick Douglass was his warning to America.[5] Arguing that Lincoln was the tool of black abolitionists, Judge Douglas said,

I have reason to recollect that some people in this country think that Fred. Douglass is a very good man. The last time I came here to make a speech, while talking from the stand to you, people of Freeport [Illinois], as I am doing today, I saw a carriage and a magnificent one it was, drive up and take a position on the outside of the crowd; a beautiful young lady was sitting on the box seat, whilst Fred. Douglass and her mother reclined inside, and the owner of the carriage acted as driver. (Laughter, cheers, cries of right, what have you to say against it, &c.) I saw this in your own town. ("What of it.") All I have to say of
it is this, that if you, Black Republicans, think that the negro ought to be on a social equality with your wives and daughters, and ride in a carriage with your wife, whilst you drive the team, you have a perfect right to do so. (Good, good, and cheers, mingled with hooting and cries of white, white.) I am told that one of Fred. Douglass' kinsmen, another rich black negro, is now traveling in this part of the state making speeches for his friend Lincoln as the champion of black men. ("White men, white men," and "what have you got to say against it." That's right, &c.) All I have to say on that subject is that those of you who believe that the negro is your equal and ought to be on an equality with you socially, politically, and legally; have a right to entertain those opinions, and of course will vote for Mr. Lincoln. ("Down with the negro," no, no, &c.)

Despite the widespread public conflict aroused by these debates and by provocative abolitionist agitation, Frederick Douglass did not foresee Secession and the Southern attack on Fort Sumter. He did, however, welcome it. During the war--while Lincoln played that devious game with both whites and blacks, and Northerners and Southerners, over what would be done with the slaves--Douglass held Lincoln's feet to the fire. Emancipation, desegregation, education, and equality of opportunity were Douglass's objectives. He wanted blacks enlisted into the Union army, paid equally with whites, and accorded all the rights of citizenship. Douglass hoped to receive a commission himself and wanted to recruit black volunteers, but when the commission did not materialize he withdrew to his home and resumed his civilian agitation on behalf of black emancipation.

The nineteenth century was a great age of oratory, and, even in an era of extraordinary public spellbinders, Frederick Douglass was a master. He modeled his delivery on that of William Lloyd Garrison, one of the best speakers of the age. But Douglass commanded an even more impressive rolling stentorian style and employed a remarkably fluent vocal range. There are many reports of "the magnetism and melody of his wonderfully elastic voice." He had in fact a repertory of voices, and roles, and dialects that could evoke wonderful affects of pity and fear, joy and laughter. His gift for satirical mimicry --of Southern slaveholders, redneck overseers, and pompous pulpit defenders of slavery--was wicked and brought down the houses in constant laughter.

Douglass could mesmerize an audience of two thousand and more for two or three hours at a time. (How different are modern politicians, who aspire to master the thirty-second sound bite!) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who acclaimed the "burning eloquence" of this fugitive slave, said that, when he warmed to the topic of the evils of slavery, he stood on the abolitionist platform "like an African prince, majestic in his wrath": "Around him sat the great antislavery orators of the day [Garrison, Pillsbury, and Phillips], earnestly watching the effect of his eloquence on that immense audience, that laughed and wept by turns, completely carried away by the wondrous gifts of his pathos and humor."

After the war Douglass continued to lecture on the lyceum circuit and publicly campaigned for successive Republican candidates--Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Blaine, and Harrison. He wrote widely and well on a wide range of topics--from the need for education and self-help to segregation, race relations, the failures of Reconstruction, and international politics. He stood for equality and saw the advancement of his people as a matter of equal opportunity. Though he hoped to be appointed to high office, Douglass was perhaps too abrasive and independent (if not too scandalous) for most Republican administrations. Grant gave him only a post with the 1871 commission investigating the idea of annexing the Dominican Republic for blacks. Hayes made him the U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia in 1877, but Garfield demoted him to the post of recorder of deeds.
After Anna died, the sixty-six-year-old Douglass shocked nearly everyone by marrying, in 1884, Helen Pitts, a white woman from New York twenty years younger than he. Neither his children nor her family approved of this match, and the interracial marriage was widely criticized in the American press. Many blacks thought that he had turned his back on his race; while many whites saw it as another step toward the "mongrelization" of the Caucasian race. But Douglass knew in his own parentage that neither law nor custom can control desire or prevent love and affection from crossing racial lines; and without apologizing or explaining he simply acted on the principles by which he had always lived. (Meanwhile, in Paris, Ottilia Assing, the German friend who had translated his My Bondage and My Freedom, inexplicably committed suicide, leaving Douglass her library of personal books and an income of $13,000 a year.)

Frederick and Helen Douglass comported themselves with the greatest dignity, were very happy together, won over many of their detractors and, in 1889, Douglass was appointed minister resident and consul general to Haiti, a post he held until 1891. The appointment in Haiti contained much meaningful symbolism since, in many respects, Douglass was to his people something of what Toussaint l'Ouverture had meant to Haitians. His final years were quiet. But toward the end he made the friendship of the young black journalist Ida B. Wells and, spurred by her ardor and burning indignation, he recovered his passion for reform with a prolonged and effective attack on the appalling wave of black lynchings in the South. He died in 1895 and was buried with Anna in Rochester, New York.

In retrospect, it is clear that Frederick Douglass was the most important black in nineteenth-century America. His courage, conviction, and fiery eloquence created admiring audiences all over the United States and in Britain. He will therefore always have a place in the history of black emancipation and of American eloquence and platform oratory. Douglass's public performances are lost to us, since he lived before the invention of voice or audio recordings. But a distinct personality well worth knowing was created in these autobiographies, which are the work of a remarkable, versatile, and accomplished writer.

One of the most affecting passages in the autobiography appeared in the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, where he described his return in 1876 to Talbot County, Maryland, to meet with the eighty-year-old Thomas Auld, his former master. After his escape Douglass had relentlessly and publicity attacked Captain Auld, by name, as the sadistic personification of slavery itself. By the outbreak of the Civil War, Auld was almost as well known as Douglass himself. But now the dying Auld had requested an interview. Although Douglass had nursed a lifetime of bitterness against his master, the visit produced a remarkable turn.

We addressed each other simultaneously, he calling me "Marshal Douglass" and I, as I had always called him, "Captain Auld." Hearing myself called by him "Marshal Douglass" I instantly broke up the formal nature of the meeting by saying, "not Marshal, but Frederick to you as formerly" We shook hands cordially, and in the act of doing so, he, having been long stricken with palsy, shed tears as men thus afflicted will do when excited by any deep emotion. The sight of him, the changes which time had wrought in him, his tremulous hands constantly in motion, and all the circumstances of his condition affected me deeply, and for a time choked my voice and made me speechless. We both, however, got the better of our feelings, and conversed freely about the past.

For all Douglass's lifelong bitterness and acute recollection of every humiliation he suffered, this was a scene of mutual forgiveness and final reconciliation. Auld told Douglass new facts about his slave family
that he had not known before, and Douglass discovered Auld to be blameless of some of the fiercest accusations Douglass had earlier brought against him. In fact, far from turning out Douglass's grandmother "like an old horse," as Douglass had charged, Auld had taken her in and provided for her to the end. Douglass discovered, in short, that he could no longer hate his former master.

Slavery was a monstrous evil, but within the interstices of any such barbaric network there will always slip that incalculable element--human feeling. It was the human equation--affection, to give it a name--that led Lucretia Auld to see that the young Douglass was assigned to the service of Master Lloyd and his son; it was affection that led Sophia Auld to want to lift the appealing young Douglass toward literacy; and it was affection, perhaps, in some warped and distorted form, that moved Captain Auld to rescue Douglass from that Easton jail in 1836--when he was on the point of being lynched for trying to escape--and return him to the Hugh Aulds in Baltimore. It takes nothing away from Douglass, who used expertly the occasions presented to him, but in some corner of his mind Douglass always knew that at crucial moments the Aulds, perhaps unconsciously, had opened doorways and created unexpected opportunities for his advancement. While the intent of Douglass's writing is always relentless anti-slavery propaganda, all three narratives move us, psychologically, toward this withheld acknowledgment of Auld's essential if fallen humanity and toward Douglass's final reconciliation with him. "He was to me no longer a slaveholder either in fact or in spirit," Douglass wrote, "and I regarded him as I did myself, a victim of the circumstances of birth, education, law, and custom." Douglass was of course denounced by some blacks for making his peace with a former slaveholder. But in transcending the desire for revenge and perpetual punishment, and in realizing this peaceful reconciliation of their differences, Douglass gave us our best hope for American racial harmony.


[2] Douglass is no more explicit in My Bondage and My Freedom (1855). The intervening Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had now turned all officers of the court into slave-catchers and Douglass's situation was even more perilous since his fugitive status was now published. The 1881 Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, written well after Emancipation, gives a fuller account of his escape to freedom.

[3] It is not dear whether Nathan Johnson or Douglass added the final s to the name of Sir Walter Scott's Lord Douglas.

[4] Julia Griffiths, it should be said, was not the only white woman with whom Douglass's name was romantically linked. Another was Ottilia Assing, a German revolutionary journalist who came to him in 1856 and remained an intimate friend until her death in 1884, the year that Douglass was remarried-this time to a white woman, Helen Pitts.

[5] I quote here from the Library of America edition of Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 83-858, which includes a reporter's parenthetical account of crowd reaction.

by James W. Tuttleton

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