

Introduction

The Language of Slavery

There may be humane masters, as there certainly are inhuman ones—there may be slaves well-clothed, well-fed, and happy, as there surely are those half-clad, half-starved and miserable. . . . Men may write fictions portraying lowly life as it is, or as it is not—may expatiate with owlish gravity upon the bliss of ignorance—discourse flippantly from arm chairs of the pleasures of slave life; but let them toil with him in the field—sleep with him in the cabin—feed with him on husks; let them behold him scourged, hunted, trampled on, and they will come back with another story in their mouths. Let them know the *heart* of the poor slave—learn his secret thoughts—thoughts he dare not utter in the hearing of the white man; let them slip by him in the silent watches of the night—converse with him in trustful confidence, of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; and they will find that ninety-nine out of every hundred are intelligent enough to understand their situation, and to cherish in their bosoms the love of freedom, as passionately as themselves.

Solomon Northup, 1853

. . . there is not yet a picture of the institution [of slavery] as seen through the eyes of the bondsman himself.

L. D. Reddick, 1937

No written text is a transparent rendering of “historical reality,” be that text composed by master or slave. The slave’s narrative has *precisely* the identical “documentary” status as does any other written account of slavery. Whereas its presuppositions tend to differ dramatically from those of texts written by non-slaves, both sorts of texts are of the same order as historical documents and literary discourse. If this volume can serve to demonstrate this obvious, yet generally ignored, first principle, then we shall have succeeded in our endeavor. Historians who work so painstakingly to establish verifiable records have, until recently, treated these texts either with an alarmingly irresponsible naïveté, or