

'ALL RIGHT!':  
The Narrative of Henry Box Brown  
*as a Test Case for the Racial Prescription  
of Rhetoric and Semiotics*

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THE CLIMAX of *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown* provided an image that became one of the most widely disseminated pictures in the abolition publications of the 1850s, on both sides of the Atlantic (fig. 1). The image of Brown, emerging from the packing case in which he was incarcerated for the duration of his trip, from slavery in Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia and freedom, was reproduced in print satires, children's books, abolition almanacs, newspapers, and as the climactic image for the enormous panorama of oil paintings with which Brown toured the towns of the Free North of America, and later Europe. The following essay attempts to explain why the image describing the celebratory conclusion to Brown's escape was open to such a variety of interpretations in such very different media.

The image of the male runaway standardized in slave advertising across the Americas and the Caribbean for over two hundred years denies personality to the slave (figs. 2 and 3). The slave does not guilefully depart under shade of night, but stands out bold

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Fig. 1. *The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia, Who escaped from Richmond Va. in a Box 3 ft. long, 2 1/2 ft deep and 2 ft wide.* Anonymous lithograph with copyright entered in 1850 by Henry Box Brown in the clerk's office of the District Court of Massachusetts. Written on the lid of the box are the words, 'Philadelphia, Pa. This side up with care.' Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society. All illustrations are reproduced from the collections of the American Antiquarian Society.

and silly on the bleak white background of the printed page. He does not sail on a boat, like Ellen and William Craft, or ride, like David Barrett, by horse,<sup>1</sup> or disguise himself as a sailor, like Frederick Douglass, or go in a train like Henry 'Box' Brown. The popular response to the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* provides a spectacular example of the ubiquity of the image of the newspaper advertisement. Although Douglass's original text was not il-

1. For the story of the Crafts, see L. Maria Child, *The Freedmen's Book* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), 179-204; for Barrett's account of his escape, see *Anti-Slavery Record*, III (July 1837): 74-83, quoted in John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 189-98.



Fig. 2. The traditional cut used in newspaper notices of a male runaway slave. The cut (No. 2623) was offered for \$1.50 in a mid-century type specimen book. *Specimens of Printing Types, Plain and Ornamental, Borders, Cuts, Rules, Dashes, &c.* From the Foundry of L. Johnson and Co. Philadelphia: L. Johnson & Co. [1858?].

lustrated, it soon generated a secondary literature of sheet music. The cover of the ballad, 'The Fugitive's Song,' presented Douglass imprisoned within the imagery of the runaway advertisement.

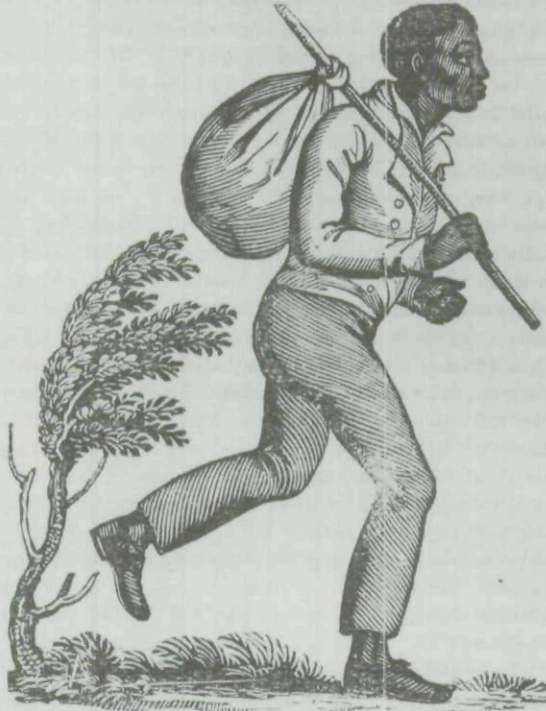


THE  
ANTI-SLAVERY RECORD.

VOL. III. No. VII.

JULY, 1837.

WHOLE No. 31.



This picture of a poor fugitive is from one of the stereotype cuts manufactured in this city for the southern market, and used on handbills offering rewards for runaway slaves.

THE RUNAWAY.

To escape from a powerful enemy, often requires as much courage and generalship as to conquer. One of the most celebrated military exploits on record, is the *retreat* of the ten thousand Greeks under

Fig. 3. Wood engraving, male runaway slave. This cut was reproduced from a commercial type specimen block by the editor, Elizur Wright. *The Anti-Slavery Standard*, New York, Vol. 3, no. 7, July 7, 1837.



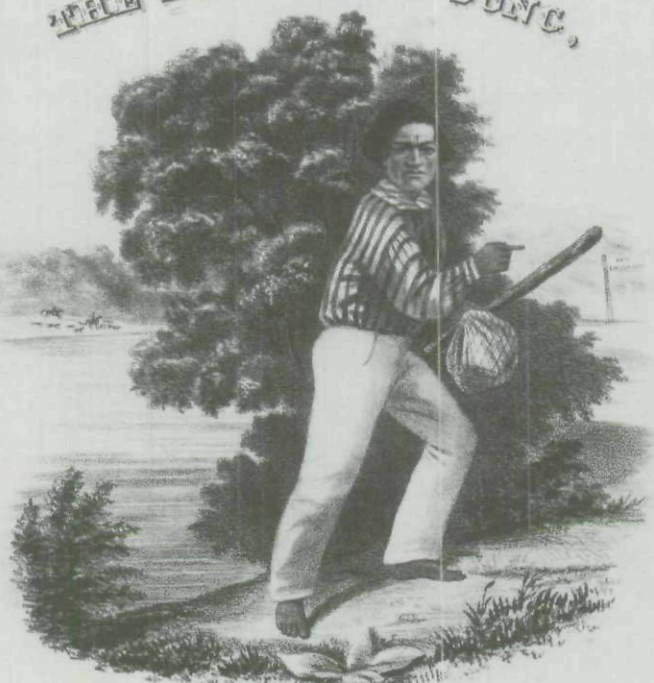
Dressed in trousers and striped shirt but carrying the stick and bundle of the classic woodcut figure, and with the inevitable bush at bottom left, he runs up a river bank, while a hunting party complete with dogs and horses is stranded on the far bank of the river (fig. 4). In its literalization of the concept of 'runaway,' this image constitutes a negation of what in practice should have been the slave's most provocative antislavery gesture.

Getting past the overwhelming semiotic associations of this image was a major problem for the abolitionists. There could be no clearer testimony to the weight with which the traditional image of the runaway sat on the collective memory of the North. Brown provided a ready-made solution to the problem of overturning this inheritance. Brown, in his own inimitable way, gave abolition perhaps the most potent single metaphor it possessed for the displacement of the traditional image of the 'runaway' slave in the popular imagination. By emerging like a hybrid Lazarus/jack-in-the-box, from a freight case, Brown stood in opposition to the central icon that the slave power had adopted to represent the fugitive slave, namely the woodcut carried on many runaway slave advertisements.<sup>2</sup>

The reason this symbolic slave of advertising does not use any of the great variety of methods of transport that were to be celebrated in the most sensational of the fugitive slave narratives is because he is publicly disempowered, an icon, a celebration, of failure. Comic, trivial, pathetic, and always the same, with his bundle of goods, and one foot eternally raised, he proclaims his inadequacy for the task he has set himself. The semiotic associations of this image were difficult for the abolitionists to overturn, and the image of Brown's resurrection provided one way of doing this. Yet it is argued below that the textual constructions of his escape are highly problematic. The ways in which his experience

2. See the chapter 'Rhetoric of the Runaway' in my forthcoming *Blind Memory: Slavery and Visual Representation 1780-1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); see also Jesse Hutchinson, Jr., 'The Fugitive's Song.' Boston: Henry Prentiss, © 1845. I am indebted to Georgia B. Barnhill for bringing this image to my attention.

**THE FUGITIVE'S SONG,**



WORDS  
Composed and respectfully dedicated, in letters of complaint, to him, in

**FREDERICK DOUGLASS**  
A Graduate from the  
**“PECULIAR INSTITUTION”**  
for his fearless advocacy, signal ability and wonderful success in behalf of  
**HIS BROTHERS IN BONDS.**  
(and in their  
**FUGITIVES FROM SLAVERY** in the  
**FREE STATES & CANADAS.**  
by their friend  
**JESSE HUTCHINSON JUNR**

BOSTON, Published by HENRY PRENTISS, 33 COURT ST.

Entered according to act of Congress in the year 1845 by Jesse Hutchison in the Clerk's office of the District Court of Massachusetts.

Fig. 4. An antislavery ballad dedicated to Frederick Douglass. Jesse Hutchinson, Jr., 'The Fugitive's Song.' Boston: Henry Prentiss, © 1845.

was interpreted, both by Brown himself and by the abolition and popular press, can be used to uncover tensions between free-white and black ex-fugitive approaches to the experience of bondage. There were fundamental differences in the ways in which Brown wished to tell and publicize his story, and the ways in which white abolition desired to design the product. Some of these tensions emerge if the first American edition of the Narrative is set against the first English edition. Brown's story appeared as a book in Boston in 1849 under the title *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Feet Wide*; the first English edition appeared in 1851 in Manchester as the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*. James Olney has drawn attention to the fact that the American edition of 1849 was substantially ghostwritten by the editor and commentator Charles Stearns, while the English edition of 1851, the title of which stressed that Brown's text was 'Written by Himself,' was markedly different in style.<sup>3</sup>

The two editions provide an opportunity to consider which linguistic and narrative elements Brown felt impelled to redevelop or introduce once he was composing his story away from the persuasive advisory presence of Stearns. Brown presents an intriguing case in terms of how his narrative is to be constructed as testimony, as literature, or as historical truth. The rightfully influential categorizations which Robert Burns Stepto has established for the comparative analysis of these qualities within slave narrative can be usefully applied to the two editions. Brown may be seen fighting his way out of Stepto's 'first phase basic narrative' or 'eclectic narrative,' where an apparatus of authenticating documentation is simply appended to the tale, and where the prescriptive editorial controls subjugate the slave voice, and into his

3. See James Olney "I was born". Slave Narratives their Status as Autobiography and as Literature' in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Charles T. Davis, eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1985), 173, note 12. The two versions of the narrative within the main text are referred to as 1849 and 1851. For details of the popular print productions surrounding Brown's narrative see pages 91-96 below.



'second phase basic narrative' or 'integrated narrative' where these materials are integrated into the main text. Yet Brown's story is much bigger than any single text which represents it.<sup>4</sup>

Conventional narrative categorization does not really provide a way of accommodating the proliferation of textual forms in which Brown's story emerged. Brown's rewriting of his narrative, and his multiple reconstructions of it, not simply as a book but on stage as a panorama, a ballad, or literally as performance when he emerged from his packing case to lecture, are all in their different ways 'true' stories. They form a totality which transcends Stepto's narratological classifications for slave testimony. Once Brown's story spirals into the world of transatlantic popular print culture, let alone that performative area which straddles the art gallery, the theatre, and the lecture hall, it becomes a phenomenon in which the whole is greater than its parts. It may be missing the point to look for the authenticated truth in such a collection of texts; it is the process of mythic generation itself that constitutes their final, and dangerously relative, truth. It should be remembered that Brown's experience was being interpreted by him and his audience at exactly the point when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exploded on the international publishing scene to generate a marketing phenomenon that struck contemporaries with awe. Henry James defined the importance of the 'Tomist' phenomenon to lie in the totality of forms that the book came to constitute, and memorably remarked that 'there was for that triumphant work no classified condition'; it 'had above all the extraordinary fortune of finding itself, for an immense number of people, much less a book than a state of vision.'<sup>5</sup> The phrasing is precise and important—'less a book than a state of vision.' This notion of a popular visionary quality superseding or engulfing the text, constantly reinventing it, nicely defines the cultural adoption of Brown's story. Most people would have experienced Stowe's book as a play, a parlor

4. See Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 3-31.

5. Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 167.

song, a design on a cup or saucer, or even as a board or card game, as most people would have experienced Brown's narrative as a song, or a series of enormous paintings, or a little article in a children's book. One of the central concerns of the following essay is to consider what English and American abolitionists wanted to take from Brown, and conversely what Brown wanted to make of himself.

The following discussion opens by considering two areas that throw into relief the tensions between how Brown wanted to tell his story and how American and English abolitionists wanted to tell it. The first is the hostility of the English establishment to Brown's performative strategies, and the second is the linguistic differences between the ghostwritten first edition of Brown's narrative and the more directly self-authored later English edition of the work. The concluding section is a series of detailed analyses of popular pictorial representations of Brown's liberation in terms of what they reveal about white identification with the metaphorical implications of Brown's emergence from the box.

In 1848 Brown was working as a slave in a tobacco factory in Richmond, Virginia, when he was suddenly informed that his master had sold his wife and three children to a Methodist minister. This was too much for him, and Brown determined on flight. His method was both novel and sensational. With the help of a white shopkeeper, Samuel Smith, who was later imprisoned for his part in the escape, Brown was shipped north in a packing case to Philadelphia and freedom by Adams Express. Brown's journey took twenty-seven hours, during which he was several times turned up the wrong way and nearly suffocated. Brown was eventually received and liberated in Philadelphia by James McKim and the black abolitionist William Still.<sup>6</sup>

6. The first eyewitness account of Brown's release, apart from his own, is that recounted by William Still, *The Underground Railroad A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Narrating the Hardships Hair-Breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the slaves in their efforts for Freedom, as related by themselves and others, or witnessed by the author* (Philadelphia, 1872),



Brown immediately became an abolition fixture, touring the east coast as a lecturer and performer. He arrived on the scene at a point when black ex-slaves had only recently become accepted in influential numbers and positions within the North American abolition movement. It was as late as 1838 that the American Anti-Slavery Society appointed Charles L. Remond its first official black lecturer, yet by the middle of the 1840s there was a large band of black lecturing agents headed by such luminaries as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Henry Bibb. In 1838 the colossal and best-selling compilation of first-hand evidence of slave brutalization and torture *American Slavery As it Is Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* emphatically marked an abolition shift. Slavery was now not to be confronted in terms of intellectual counters to the pro-slavery arguments that the system constituted a 'positive good,' but was to be attacked through revelations of the cruelty and fear which underlay its maintenance. The most spectacular testimony was to come from the narratives and lectures of ex-slaves themselves. The late 1840s and the early 1850s saw a boom in slave narrative publication, and in the mass expansion of abolition publicity. The furious reception of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 among large sections of Northern society acted as a huge fillip both for white and black abolitionists, who became increasingly radicalized. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 sensation *Uncle Tom's Cabin* formed the most spectacular vanguard for a publicity surge that covered all available areas of print production from broadsides, handbills, and street ballads to the most sophisticated illustrated gift books. The popular climate had also changed, and white audiences across the North developed a thirst for a wide range of writings and performances from ex-slaves, although there were tensions over the level of narrative

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84. Standard accounts of the career of H. B. Brown are in R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall, Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 158-59, 169-70; William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story, The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 99-100; *The British Isles, 1830-65*, vol. 1 of *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 174-75 note.



independence to be allowed ex-slave orators.<sup>7</sup> Brown clearly possessed entrepreneurial flair and flung himself into the task of advertising his legend as widely as possible. Not content with publishing his narrative and with lecturing, he also organized the production of a colossal travelling panorama, *The Mirror of Slavery*, painted by professional artists in Boston and reputedly occupying more than fifty thousand square feet of canvas. It consisted of a series of descriptions of the atrocities of the slave system and culminated in an account of his escape.<sup>8</sup> Brown and the abolitionists immediately saw the publicity potential of this eccentric mode of escape. Brown kept the famous box and toured the abolition lecture circuit with it. On occasions he would begin a lecture by leaping out of it. By January 1850 he had become a star-turn and entertained the Anti Slavery Mass Convention of the Abolitionists of New York with an oration and a performance of the popular ballad he had composed about his escape. He performed in company with a free black, J. C. A. Smith, who had helped 'pack' Brown originally and who had then proceeded North, having been cleared of his part in the affair by a court in Virginia.

Brown's story developed an even more sensational twist when, in the autumn of 1850, as a direct result of the passage of the new Fugitive Slave Law, an attempt was made by slave catchers to kidnap him. Brown almost immediately left for England and was one among a veritable roll call of great black abolitionists, male and female, who toured the English abolition lecture circuit during the early 1850s. Brown's motives were clearly in part those of self-preservation, yet he continued to publicize the abolition cause

7. For white control of black lecturing, see *United States, 1830-1846*, in *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 3: 26-30.

8. For a discussion of the adaptation of Brown's narrative by American abolitionists, see Cynthia Griffin Wolff, 'Passing Beyond the Middle Passage: Henry "Box" Brown's Translations of Slavery,' *The Massachusetts Review* (Spring, 1996), 23-43. For the shifting impact of blacks in the American abolition movement, see Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans from the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom to the Eve of the Compromise of 1850*, 3 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 2: 479-535. For a good contextualizing analysis of the effect of Weld's *American Slavery As It Is*, see Foner, 2: 411-14. For an overview of the shift in the role of black abolitionists between 1830 and 1850, *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 3: 27-57.

and to attack the existence and effects of the new law before English audiences.<sup>9</sup> He toured the British Isles for four years, lecturing, singing, and showing the enormous canvases. He married an English woman, and then slips out of historical records.<sup>10</sup> Yet Brown's performances in England and his refusal to succumb to the established norms for black ex-slave performers on the abolition lecture circuit uncover a great deal about the expectations of his audience and the creative impulses behind Brown's radical refusal to meet those expectations.<sup>11</sup>

The British Anti Slavery Society had narrow ideas about how it expected black ex-slave lecturers to behave and publicize their experiences. Black abolitionists had to arrive with letters of introduction from white Northern abolitionists and were expected to present themselves as sober Christians intent on bettering themselves in white society. They were even encouraged to move on to work as missionaries in Africa, and several American ex-slaves took this option.<sup>12</sup> Henry Box Brown appears, however, to have

9. A full list of all black abolitionists in the British Isles from 1830 to 1865 is given in *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 1: 571-73; for a detailed account of the experiences of ex-slave lecturers in England, see 1: 5-35.

10. For the role of J. C. A. Smith and his quarrel with Brown in England, see *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 1: 293-97, and 298 note. Brown's Panorama is also discussed at some length in this correspondence. The catalogue to Brown's panorama has not survived, but that of William Wells Brown, first printed in London and titled *A Description of William Wells Brown's Original Panoramic Views of the Scenes in the Life of An American Slave*, has survived. This was on a similar scale to, and contemporaneous with, 'Box' Brown's, and is reproduced *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 1: 190-224. An advertisement for Brown's panorama with a full list of the individual canvases constituting its three parts appeared in *The Liberator*, April 19, 1850. This is reproduced in full in Wolff, 'Passing Beyond the Middle Passage,' 31-33.

11. For the commodification of black ex-slaves within abolition publicity structures, see Wolff, 'Passing Beyond the Middle Passage,' 23-24, and Michael Newberry 'Eaten Alive: Slavery and Celebrity in Ante-bellum America,' *English Literary History* 61 (1994): 159-87.

12. The best discussion of the relation of black abolitionists in England and America to missionary and emigrationist policy is in Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall*, 162-94. For a brief consideration of Brown and the interrelations between public performance and slave narrative in the context of Garrisonian evangelical abolition, see Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 99-100. For the rise of Black ex-fugitives on the professional lecture circuit in America, and the behavioral and linguistic codes surrounding them, see Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), and Larry Gara, 'The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement,' *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 48 (1965): 196-204. The introduction to *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 1: 3-36, provides a superb historical and social analysis of the role and activities of black American abolitionists in Britain.



kicked against the pricks and to have been very much his own man. He delighted in showmanship, and in the performance of his escape. He had, after all, endured the agony of seeing his family sold South, and considered himself, after his traumatic journey in the box, to have triumphed over an experience which very nearly destroyed him, and to have achieved a second birth.<sup>13</sup> As a popular prophet and entertainer with a sensational story to tell, working in a society which had been notorious since Swift's time for its delight in freak shows and strange tales, Brown went his own way. His abilities at self-promotion were phenomenal. While in England he went so far as to physically re-enact his escape. During a lecture tour in the industrial North, he made the one and a half hour journey from Bradford to Leeds crated up again in his box, emerging triumphantly at the other end before going on to lecture.<sup>14</sup>

Brown's flamboyant style, showy dressing, and propensity to interlard his lectures with antislavery songs and spirituals, brought him into conflict with the more 'respectable' element of his English audiences. He shattered the ceremonial and rhetorical proprieties of the formal lecture hall. He introduced elements of his own art and folk culture and fused them with the visual conventions of the circus, beast show, and pictorial panorama. Brown challenged the accepted framework for the presentation of the ordeal of the runaway. Black lecturers were expected to talk about their freedom in terms which emphasized humility before God. They would list the evils of the slave system within the framework of a formal lecture that demanded linguistic propriety and the open profession of gratitude. Because he flirted dangerously with commercial publicity methods, and perhaps because of his unabashed introduction of slave verse and spiritual singing, Brown suffered more racist abuse in England than any other black

13. For the extent to which blacks could still, even at this remarkably late date, market themselves as exotic and strange exhibits within the London show world, see Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

14. Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall*, 15, note 22.



abolitionist.<sup>15</sup> He went beyond the formal pale in the relation of his experiences and consequently forsook the suspension of racist animosity enjoyed by the majority of ex-slave lecturers on the abolition circuit.

The articles about Brown in the *Wolverhampton and Staffordshire Gazette* described his panorama as a 'gross and palpable exaggeration . . . a jumbled mass of contradictions and absurdities, assertions without proof, geography without boundary and horrors without parallel'; the South appeared as 'a series of inquisitorial chambers of horrors—a sort of Blue Beard, or a giant despair den, for the destruction, burning, branding, lacerations, starving and working of Negroes' and those who held slaves 'demi-fiends, made of double distilled brimstone.'<sup>16</sup> *The Herald* went further to attack Brown as a "bejewelled darky" whose portly figure and overdressed appearance bespeak the gullibility of our most credulous age and country'; he was later described as a 'bejewelled and oily negro, whose obese and comfortable figure and easy nonchalance, reminds one of various good things and sumptuous living.' The paper moved on to even more bare-faced racism, describing Brown's 'nocturnal antics' performed with 'ludicrous and semi-baboonish agility' to delight the 'juvenile ragamuffins' who constitute his audience.<sup>17</sup> Brown sued the editor and won £100 damages. The case caused a stir and was covered in *The Times*, which defended Brown with the aside that although his dress was 'rather fine, and he displayed some jewellery about his person, his man-

15. Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall*, 159–60. Blackett sees it as significant that none of the other black ex-slaves in Britain at the time came to Brown's defence.

16. All these press quotations are from Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall*, 159–60. Against construction of the panorama as absurd melodrama one might set the reaction of Justin Spaulding, 'the real *life-like* scenes presented in this PANORAMA, are admirably calculated to make an unfading impression upon the heart and memory, such as no lectures, books, or colloquial correspondence can produce' (1851, iv).

17. This material was brought to light in Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall*, 159, from which I quote. Blackett does not consider the implications of Brown's performative approach to abolition publicity in the context of the formulae laid down in England for the public appearance of ex-slaves.

ner of giving his evidence was very quiet and creditable and his pronunciation altogether correct.<sup>18</sup>

Brown's spectacular performances may have been out of kilter with British notions of what should constitute the behavior of a black ex-slave on a lecture platform, but Brown's approach brings out the extent to which he was in tune with the spirit of the time. He drew on commercial and creative resources that white abolitionists shied away from. When a reviewer opines against the fact that Brown's audience included 'juvenile ragamuffins,' there is an assumption that abolition is territory in need of strict control, that if black ex-slaves generate an appeal beyond the respectable and educated white abolition societies, the appeal is debased and worthless. Without guidance and surveillance the black will lose his precarious grip on respectability and fall into the chaotic and degenerate environment of popular entertainment. This constituted part of a world that had ordained certain roles for blacks in London—if they were lucky servants, pugilists, and minstrels, if not crossing sweepers and beggars.<sup>19</sup>

Yet Brown fought attempts to close down the languages in which he decided to narrate his experiences at both a textual and a performative level. Brown had spirit, in the true gospel sense, and his religious interpretation of his escape was reverent and awe-filled, but also full of joy and even a certain element of comedy. Brown's gifts as a self-dramatist, and his ability to draw on linguistic and artistic resources unique to North American slave culture, come out clearly if the account of the moment of his liberation, in the 1851 text of the narrative, which it would appear he wrote entirely himself, is set against that which he co-wrote two years earlier with Charles Stearns. In the 1851 text the first words he spoke on his release registered his physical well being: 'A voice said "Is all right within?" to which I replied "all right."' Revealingly, these first words are given in the introduction by one

18. *The Times*, July 30, 1852. Quoted in Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall*, 159.

19. See James Walvin, ed., *Black and White: The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1973).



of the witnesses and again a quarter century later by William Still as, 'all right, sir.'<sup>20</sup> Brown then immediately fainted and on recovering consciousness his first extended response was to break into his own gospel rendition of the fortieth Psalm.<sup>21</sup> Brown's ecstatic arrangement of scripture is quoted in full in his own version of the narrative. The compulsive reiteration reinvents the psalm as a hymn of heartbreaking innocence singing praise at the coming of a personal Jubilee:

I waited patiently, I waited patiently for the Lord, for the Lord;  
 And he inclined unto me, and heard my calling:  
 I waited patiently, I waited patiently, for the Lord;  
 And he inclined unto me, and heard my calling:  
 And he put a new song in my mouth,  
 Even a thanksgiving, even a thanksgiving, even a thanksgiving unto  
 our God.  
 Blessed, Blessed, Blessed, Blessed is the man, Blessed is the man,  
 Blessed is the man that has set his hope, his hope in the Lord;  
 Oh Lord my God, Great, Great, Great, Great, . . .  
 . . . Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad,  
 Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad, be joyful  
 and glad, be joyful and glad, be joyful, be joyful, be joyful, be joy-  
 ful, be joyful and glad—be glad in thee . . . (1851, 57-58)

Brown had chosen this text because in its original version the theme of resurrection from the pit had a precise relevance: 'I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God.' But Brown takes a creative approach to his source, seizing on key

20. M. McRoy's account of the opening in the 1851 introduction runs: 'in answer to my rap on the box and question, "all right," the prompt response came, "all right, sir"' (iii); Still wrote, 'The proceedings commenced. Mr. McKim rapped quietly on the lid of the box and called out "All right!" Instantly came the answer from within. "All right, sir!"' (*The Underground Railroad*, 83).

21. Still gives a different account from Brown's, stating that he had planned this performance long before. 'Very soon he remarked that, before leaving Richmond he had selected for his arrival hymn (if he lived) the Psalm beginning with these words: "*I waited patiently for the Lord, and He heard my prayer.*" And most touchingly did he sing the psalm, much to his own relief, as well as to the delight of his small audience' (84).



phrases and extemporizing. This is the word of God as performed in the slave-camp meeting, but this is also an approach to the word of God which finds its echo in English millenarianism. The Christopher Smart of *Jubilate Agno*, and of *The Song to David*, a man who fell on his knees to sing to the Lord in the middle of London's streets, would have understood Brown's words, as would many English ecstasies of the late eighteenth century, from William Blake to Granville Sharp and Nathaniel Brassey Halhead.<sup>22</sup> They were, however, not words which easily fell on the ears of the Boston gentry halfway through the nineteenth century. In the 1849 edition the hymn was not included in the main text of the narrative at all, but hidden in the introductory apparatus of prefaces, dedicatory letters, and testimonials. Even within the stylistically less fastidious parameters of the American ballad market Brown's performance of scripture was not allowed free rein. A Boston street ballad with the title 'Song, Sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box' was illustrated with an 'Engraving of the Box in which Henry Box Brown escaped from slavery in Richmond, Va.,' and had for its text a formal translation of verses one, four, five, eleven, and sixteen of the fortieth Psalm that completely avoided Brown's ecstatic repetitions. The ballad was headed with a simple engraving of the box, inscribed 'Philadelphia Pa. Right side up with care.' The box itself is shown emphatically sealed with five heavy black bands; Brown presumably is to be imagined still safely inside it (fig. 5).<sup>23</sup>

Brown, in placing his hymn in its proper context, does something of immense importance: he replaces the earlier linguistically sanitized account of his experience with his own language and cultural form. Communal song was a, perhaps *the*, central form of religious artistic expression for the slave community, and continues to occupy a position in African-American religious experience that is beyond most white imaginative capability to ei-

22. For a brilliant account of the enormous impact of the culture and language of popular prophecy in England in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

23. 'Song sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from box.' Broadside, 1849. American Antiquarian Society. I am grateful to Georgia B. Barnhill of the American Antiquarian Society for bringing this ballad to my notice.



**Engraving of the Box in which HENRY BOX BROWN escaped from slavery in Richmond, Va.**

**SONG,**

*Sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box.*

I waited patiently for the Lord ;—  
And he, in kindness to me, heard my calling—  
And he hath put a new song into my mouth—  
Even thanksgiving—even thanksgiving—  
Unto our God!

Blessed—blessed is the man  
That has set his hope, his hope in the Lord !  
O Lord ! my God ! great, great is the wondrous work  
Which thou hast done !

If I should declare them—and speak of them—  
They would be more than I am able to express.  
I have not kept back thy love, and kindness, and truth,  
From the great congregation !

Withdraw not thou thy mercies from me,  
Let thy love, and kindness, and thy truth, always preserve me—  
Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad !  
Be joyful and glad !

And let such as love thy salvation—  
Say always—say always—  
The Lord be praised !  
The Lord be praised !

Laing's Steam Press, 1 1-2 Water Street, Boston.

Fig. 5. The unsigned engraving of the iron-strapped shipping box marked 'Philadelphia, Pa. Right side up with care' appears on two broadside ballad versions of Henry Box Brown's story both printed at the same Boston press in 1849. *Song, Sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box.* Boston: Laing's Steam Press, 1849.

ther imitate or comprehend.<sup>24</sup> This hymn is Brown's hymn; in its enthusiastic repetitions and energetic anti-intellectualism, it is alien to the sobriety of the lecture hall or biblical scholarship. Brown's rhetoric is the rhetoric of the prayer meeting and of religious inspiration. The participant doesn't describe or narrate, but celebrates, shares joy, and is filled with the Holy Spirit.

There are several other examples of Brown's determination to reinvent his experience using vernacular forms and language which his white editors had denied in the first edition of his *Narrative*. The main text of Brown's 1851 *Narrative* concludes with the retelling of his escape in the form of a popular ballad that he composed himself, and apparently sang when at public meetings. Sung to the tune of the popular air 'Uncle Ned,' and carrying a comic chorus, the ballad concluded:

The friends gathered round and asked if all was right,  
As down on the box they did rap,  
Brown answered them, saying, 'yes all is right!'  
He was then set free from his pain.

*Chorus:* Brown laid down the shovel and the hoe,  
Down in the box he did go;  
No more Slave work for Henry Box Brown,  
In the box by *Express* he did go. (1851, 61)

Again, this ballad was not considered appropriate for printing in the 1849 American edition. Brown's narrative initiated the multiple retellings and simplifications of his story which rapidly spread in the English and American press. If, however, the first American edition found the ballad hard to stomach, the same cannot be said of the street ballad market. Brown's escape song was printed in full as a single long ballad under the title 'Escape from Slavery of Henry Box Brown . . . AIR Uncle Ned.' The sheet was printed

24. See Milton G. Sernett, 'Black Religion and the Question of Evangelical Identity,' in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 135-47. Sernett states, 'The communal song, not catechetics, has been the principal hermeneutic of the African-American religious experience . . . interpretations of black destiny and divine providence in the face of the vagaries of human existence and the realities of oppression signify more than debates concerning liturgical practice or scriptural accuracy' (135).



with elaborate borders and headed by a bold engraving of the famous packing case. The reference to the tune of 'Uncle Ned' would suggest that the verses were being circulated at street level as a popular song.<sup>25</sup> In the very process of retelling his story Brown provided it with the comic and folkloric elements that were to cause and to typify its popular assimilation. Above all, Brown had the confidence to embrace the bathetic elements of the tale. A man shipped in a box, turned on his head, tumbling out ruefully having tricked the entire force of the slaveholding South, is, at one level, the stuff of slapstick. But it is the potent slapstick of the triumphant underdog; Brown is a kind of Brer Rabbit figure, with his nose in exuberant performance and his tale in African and African-American folklore. He is a wily as well as an heroic ex-slave. The chorus to Brown's song seems artless, but uses technological reference cunningly. As an urban laborer in a tobacco factory Brown would not have used the hoe of the agricultural laborer, yet this reference to the figure of the generic field hand serves to place Brown among the mass of anonymous suffering slaves. Against the agricultural primitivism of the shovel and hoe is set Brown's commandeering of industrial technology. He didn't have to run away, he used the most advanced technology and travelled as his delighted italics announce, '*express.*' Now there will be no more 'Slave work,' he will work for himself.

If some members of contemporary audiences were suspicious of Brown in the flesh, the narrative of his escape was full-bloodedly embraced in the abolition and popular press. Given the fact that so much of Brown's work is unrecoverable, the common fate of performance artists to this day, this discussion of the visual dimension is reduced to a brief consideration of ways in which Brown's escape was taken up in pamphlet literature, children's books, and graphic satire.

Brown's narrative had a ready-made metaphorical dimension

25. 'Escape from slavery of Henry Box Brown . . . .' Broadside, 1849. American Antiquarian Society. I am grateful to Georgia B. Barnhill of the American Antiquarian Society for bringing this ballad to my notice.

lacking from other slave narratives. The process of his escape was a paradoxical embodiment both of the experience of bondage and of the experience of freedom. His imprisonment in the box was not simply an ingenious method of escape. It was a symbolic entombment, Brown in the Box was Brown's soul, and the soul of every slave, in a state of bondage. Brown coming out of the Box was not simply the emergence of one spirited fugitive but the spiritual and physical liberation of every escaped slave, and by implication of the American spirit emerging from the moral entombment of slavery. Brown's escape was propagandistically reconstituted as an enormous mythological embodiment of national liberation, a national moral apotheosis. It was the emancipation declaration in microcosm and proleptically performed. Hence its appeal to free white audiences on both sides of the Atlantic was fundamentally rooted in a language of christological resurrection and apotheosis.

While Brown was undoubtedly his own best publicist, he was immediately appropriated by the abolitionist press in America and his mode of escape taken up and transformed into a complicated metaphor for the slave system itself. The method of these appropriations gives remarkable insights into what it was that white abolitionists wanted to take out of, and to get out of, empathy with the slave. The suffocating box, shutting out the light and causing Brown mental and physical torture, represented the rigors, hardness, cruelty, and moral blindness of slavery. Brown's agonized journey in pain and dark through thralldom to freedom, from imprisonment to liberation, from physical confinement to open movement, from light to dark, was seen as a metaphor for the journey which every slave had to make, and beyond this every Christian in the Southern states. Brown is both miraculous escape artist and divinely ordained for liberation from the living death of slavery, metaphorically sacred and profane, fact and myth, Houdini and Lazarus.<sup>26</sup>

26. Wolff, 'Passing Beyond the Middle Passage,' 28, argues that Brown's embowment



The first American edition of Brown's escape was written up and edited by Charles Stearns, also the publisher, and although Stearns's claims that his writing is 'Written from a statement of facts' made by Brown, it is written in a hyperbolic and sentimental style clearly designed for a white audience seeking melodrama within the framework of a conventionalized Christianity. The Stearns text is a testimony to the white editor's almost pathological desire not to allow Brown to tell his own story. Stearns's blowy paraphrases constantly seek to titillate, and to insert a vulgarized Christianity. Stearns puts a mandatory disclaimer in his preface, stating he has written 'Not for the purpose of administering to a prurient desire to "hear and see some new thing".' In fact this defines his motives nicely. Where Brown's own 1851 edition opens with the simple statement 'I was born about forty five miles from the city of Richmond,' Stearns's earlier version opens 'I am not about to harrow the feelings of my readers by a terrific representation of the untold horrors of the fearful system of oppression, which for thirty three long years entwined its snaky folds about my soul, as the serpent of South America coils itself around the soul of its unfortunate victim . . .' (1849, iv).

Even Stearns, however, realizes the potential of Brown's emboxment and journey as a spiritual symbol, and plays it for all it's worth. The paper cover of the cheap editions carried an illustration of the sealed box with Brown inside it, inscribed 'Philadelphia Pa. right side up with Care' and bearing the inscription beneath '3 feet 1 inch long, 2 feet wide, 2 ft. 6 inches high.'<sup>27</sup> The box is presented standing vertically upright, as when Brown was

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can be read as a metaphor for the middle passage. Curiously no contemporary accounts I have seen make this connection. Leonard Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 105, provides an ironic reading of Brown's emboxment, pointing out that he has to literally turn himself into an object in order to make himself a person.

27. The British Library edition, 1851, is still in its wrappers. BL 10882. b. 35 (3). *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box Three Feet Long, Two Wide and Two and a half High. Written from a Statement of Facts made by Himself With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery By Charles Stearns. Boston 1849.*



placed on his head. A text running above and below reads as follows:

REPRESENTATION OF THE BOX, In which a fellow mortal travelled a long journey, in quest of those rights which the piety and republicanism of this country denied him the right to possess. As long as the temples of humanity contain a single worshipper, whose heart beats in unison with that of the God of the universe; must a religion and a government which could inflict such a misery upon a human being, be execrated and fled from, as a bright angel abhors and flees from the touch of hideous sin.<sup>28</sup>

The preface presents Brown through a number of elaborate historical contextualizations. He is compared to a Spartan—‘the picture here drawn of misery, and of endurance, worthy of a Spartan, and such as a hero of old might be proud of, and transmit to posterity along with the armorial blazonry of his ancestors’ (1849, vi)—and to the early English radical dissenter Hugo Grotius, who was ‘sent from his prison confined in a small chest of draws [but] without undergoing much suffering or running the terrible risk that our friend ran’ (1849, vi). Stearns in fact exhibits a possessive obsessiveness in his prefatory relation to Brown’s text. He rushes to tell Brown’s tale for him. In his competitive zeal Stearns attempts to thrust a narrative preeminence upon Brown, that not only places him beyond the achievement of other sensational slave narratives, but seeks to make him a best-seller, with a popular appeal beyond that of Sir Walter Scott: ‘A William and Ellen Craft, indeed performed an almost equally hazardous undertaking, and one which, as a devoted admirer of human daring has said, far exceeded anything recorded in Macaulay, and will yet be made the ground-work for a future Scott to build a more intensely interesting tale upon than “the author of *Waverly*” ever put forth, but they had the benefits of their eyes and ears—they were not entirely helpless; enclosed in a moving tomb and utterly destitute of power to control your movements as if death had fastened his icy

28. British Library edition, BL 10882. b. 35 (3), back paper wrapper, verso.

arm upon you, and yet possessing all the full tide of gushing sensibilities, and a complete knowledge of your existence, as was the case with our friend.' Stearns's elaboration of the idea of Brown's escape as a resurrection is a supreme sales pitch. As the metaphor gathers force Brown is not merely to be compared with Lazarus, his escape is 'more astonishing' than that. Indeed there seem to be no limits to the claims Stearns will make for his man, as he moves into fully blown vulgar gothic. The passage is worth quoting at length as it grasps at a welter of cultural and mythological crutches to support the racing fantasy of its author:

We read with horror of the burial of persons before life has entirely fled from them, but here is a man who voluntarily assumed a condition in which he knew all the chances were against him, and when his head seemed well nigh severed from his body, on account of the concussion occasioned by the rough handling to which he was subject, see the Spartan firmness of his soul. Not a groan escaped from his agonized heart, as the agonies of his condition were so vividly presented before him. Death stared him in the face, but like Patrick Henry, only when the alternative was more a matter of fact than it was to the patriot, he exclaimed, 'Give me liberty or give me death;' and death seemed to say, as quickly as the lion seizes the kid into its den, 'You are already mine' and was about to wrap its sable mantle about the form of our self-martyred hero—bound fast upon the altars of freedom, as the Hindoo widow is bound upon the altar of a husband's love—when the bright angel of liberty, whose dazzling form he had so long and so anxiously watched, as he pored over the scheme, hid in the recesses of his own fearless brain, while yet a slave, and whose shining eyes had bewitched his soul, until he had said in the language of one old to Jesus 'I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest,' when this blest goddess stood at his side, and as Jesus said to one lying cold in death's embrace, 'I say unto thee arise' said to him as she took him by the hand and lifted him from his travelling tomb, 'thy warfare is over thy work is accomplished, a free man art thou, my guidance has availed thee, arise and breath the air of freedom.'

Did Lazarus surprise his weeping sisters and surrounding multitude, as he emerged from his house of Clay, clad in the habiliments of the grave, and did joy unfeigned spread throughout that gazing throng? How much more astonishing seemed the birth of Mr. Brown,



as he 'came forth' from a box, clothed not in the habiliments of the grave, but in those of slavery, worse than 'the silent house of death', as his acts had testified, and what greater joy thrilled through the wondering witnesses, as the lid was removed from the travelling carriage of our friends electing, and straightway arose therefrom a living man, being made in God's own image, a son of Jehovah, whom the piety and republicanism of this nation had doomed to pass through his terrible ordeal, before the word of the Goddess of liberty could complete his transformation from a slave to a free man! But we will desist from further comments. Here is the plain narrative of our friend. . . . Here are the identical words (1849, vii-viii).

What lies behind such immoderation, such linguistic incontinence? It is the desperation not to let the story go, not to leave the reader with Brown's, albeit heavily contaminated, text. Stearns cannot bear the idea of letting the 'plain narrative of our friend' speak for itself. It is as if Stearns claims the events, and his imaginative recreation of them, as his own. No other slave narrative seemed to create such a compulsive desire for self-identification upon a white audience. Brown's experience seems to have given him a secret insight into life, and after-life. As a kind of slave Lazarus he is a living dead man, and of course a typological representative of the living Christ.

But when Brown two years later finally managed to tell his story in 'the identical words,' he treated the theme of resurrection with far more discretion. It is very simply done. He first states 'they soon managed to break open the box, and then came my resurrection from the grave of slavery,' and he then states that when he got out of the box, 'I had risen, as it were, from the dead' (1851, 57).

The introduction to the first English edition, however, contains a series of letters that maintain the far more elaborate analogies for the redemptive and resurrective implications of Brown's escape. All these accounts obey a pattern in setting their religious and metaphoric claims off against the precise reiteration of the empirical facts of the case. More remarkable biblical comparisons are



made. Brown is seen as another Moses miraculously leading the enslaved out of bondage to the promised land: 'the following narrative has a mission from God to the Human family. Certainly the deliverance of Moses, from destruction on the Nile, was scarcely more marvellous than was the deliverance of Mr. Henry Box Brown from the horrors of slavery' (1851, ii). For the receiver of the Box, J. McKim, seeing Brown emerge was to see a literal resurrection, and a resurrection which simultaneously defined in one sensational image the difference between slavery and freedom: 'I confess, if I had not myself been present at the opening of the box on its arrival, and had not witnessed with my own eyes, your resurrection from your living tomb, I should have been strongly disposed to question the truth of the story. As it was, however, seeing was believing, and believing was with me, at least, to be impressed with the diabolical character of American Slavery, and the obligation that rests upon every one to labour for its overthrow' (1851, iv). McKim casts himself in the guise of doubting Thomas to Brown's risen Christ; Brown is 'resurrected' and has harrowed the hell of slavery in the Southern states which is 'diabolical.'

While these letters set up a mythic dimension to describe the escape this is paralleled by an almost fetishistic fascination with the physical details of the escape. The dimensions of the box, the labels on it, the type of box are obsessively listed. Another of the 'witnesses' present at Brown's opening, M. McRoy, gives an account which reveals the mesmeric power which the box, as physical object, exerted on audiences:

He came to me on Saturday Morning last, in a box tightly hooped, marked 'THIS SIDE UP,' by *overland express from the city of Richmond!!* . . . Nothing that was done on the barricades of Paris exceeded this cool and deliberate intrepidity. To appreciate fully the boldness and risk of the achievement, you ought to see the box and hear all the circumstances. The box is in the clear three feet one inch long, two feet six inches deep, and two feet wide. It was a regular old store box such as you see in Pearl-street;—it was grooved at the joints and braced at the ends, leaving but the very slightest crevice to admit the air (1851, ii-iii).

The dirty, dangerous, and arbitrary processes of the posting are important because they define Brown's status up to the moment of his liberation as a piece of merchandise. He is property, he 'was tumbled along on drays, railroad cars, steam-boat, and horse carts, as any other box of merchandise would have been, sometimes on his feet, sometimes on his side, and once, for an hour or two, actually on his head' (1851, v). The world of slavery, which reduces man to a commodity with no personal worth except in the most strict and dehumanizing sense of a market price, has forced Brown to make himself into a package. His essential humanity, his ability to stand on his own two feet, is denied and travestied. Brown, as the product of the world of slavery, has his world literally turned upside down, stood on its head, slavery itself becomes a topos of topsy-turvydom.

Brown's suffering and resurrection, his mythic appeal, can be established only through the minute observation of the facts of his escape, and at the heart of these facts is the box itself, womb and tomb, object of torture and vessel of liberation. The box is a paradox, a holy abolition relic, and Brown's most useful touring asset.

In the avalanche of visual representations of Brown's escape that appeared in American and English publications the key moment of the emergence from the box inevitably holds center stage (see fig. 1 above). The largest and most polished of the single-sheet print representations of the scene is a lithograph that shows clearly in its title how Brown, in the popular imagination, already enjoyed symbolic status as one returned from the dead. *The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia. Who escaped from Richmond to Va. in a Box 3 ft. long, 2 1/2 ft deep and 2 ft wide* neatly combines the facts with the nascent myth. Brown emerges looking rueful but very serious and stares straight at the audience. He is impeccably dressed and a little dishevelled, pushing out of the crate to the general delight of a no less fashionably attired audience of four. His audience is presented as amused; their expressions exist somewhere between smirking incredulity and laughter. It is difficult to determine if the print contains a satiric



edge. What is certain is that like the introductory letters it is fixated with the precise physical details of Brown's packaging and unpackaging. One spectator holds a claw hammer, and another spectator a wicker basket for the tools. Frederick Douglass, who has been opportunistically introduced to the scene, holds a crow bar. A discarded mallet and several long nails litter the foreground.

Part of the print's fascination lies in the way it provides a total contrast to the customary iconography of the runaway as manifested in the single-sheet political print, and indeed in print culture generally. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act by Congress in September 1850, which put new obligations on the population of the free North to return fugitive slaves, elicited a mass of propaganda in the North, including political prints. Slaves are invariably shown being harried, pursued, shot down, or chased by dogs. A print such as *Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law* (fig. 6) is a typical example. Skilfully drawn, and using the potential of stone lithography to pick up the subtle shading of chalk and crayon drawing, this print nevertheless presents blacks as victims. They are butchered martyrs, sacrificed on the altar of freedom. The crucial point is that *Effects* is a print semiotically still confined within the dialectic of the runaway advertisement, the slaves still run on foot, and their act of flight is still futile. In this sense it returns to its iconic ancestry, the famous woodcut generated in the slave states to describe their lost property (see fig. 2). The depiction of Brown's escape substitutes stasis for flight, jubilation for agony, and technology for shank's pony. Brown may have suffered, but he let white technology do the work of moving for him. He has broken out of the metaphoric space of the runaway and arrives in that of the industrialized North.

Cheap woodcut versions soon followed (fig. 7). The same cut was used several times in *The Liberty Almanac* with different texts. The volume for 1851 carried a woodcut showing Brown surrounded by four white men.<sup>29</sup> Douglass has disappeared from this

29. *Liberty Almanac for 1851* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1851), 15.



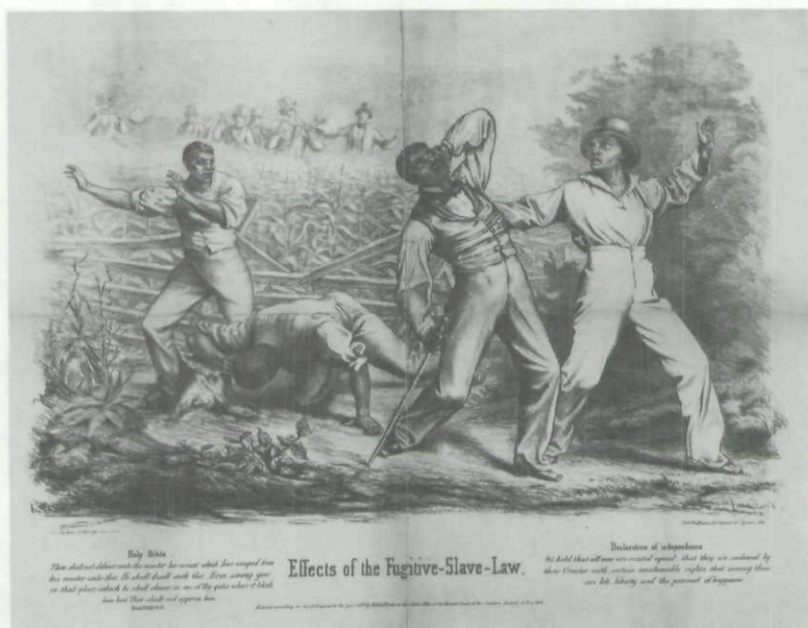


Fig. 6. Theodore Kaufman, *Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law*. This lithograph by the German emigrant engraver includes verses 15 and 16 from Deuteronomy 23 and a sentence from the Declaration of Independence as antislavery texts. New York: Hoff and Bloede, 1850.

cut; Brown is reduced to shirt sleeves and heaves himself out of the box holding on to the arm of one of the spectators. A short paragraph below gives the outline of the escape, ending with the words: 'On receiving the box the gentleman had doubts whether he should find a corpse or a living man. He tapped lightly on the box with the question "All right?" and was delighted to hear the response "All right, sir." The poor fellow was immediately liberated from his place of burial.' A footnote is appended: 'His name has received an addition since this occurrence, and he is now known as Henry *Box* Brown.'<sup>30</sup>

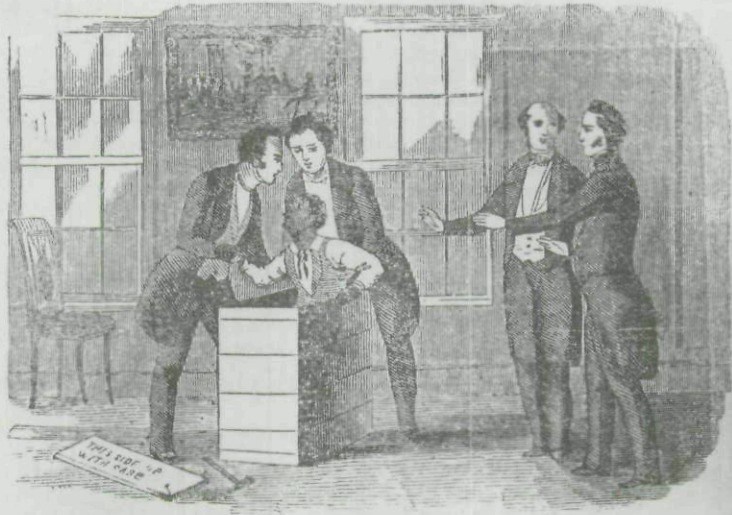
This may seem innocent enough, but Brown's account has undergone some sinister modifications. The account of M. McRoy

30. *Liberty Almanac for 1851*, 15.

A FUGITIVE CARRIED BACK TO SLAVERY FROM LONDON.

15

## HENRY BOX BROWN.



The following remarkable incident exhibits the cruelty of the slave system, while it shows the ingenuity and desperate determination of its victims to escape from it:—

A few months ago, a slave in a Southern city managed to open a correspondence with a gentleman in a Northern city, with a view to effect his escape from bondage. Having arranged the preliminaries, he paid somebody \$40 to box him up, and mark him, "This side up, with care," and take him to the Express office, consigned to his friend at the North. On the passage, being on board of a steamboat, he was accidentally turned head downward, and almost died with the rush of blood to the head. At the next change of transportation, however, he was turned right side up again; and after twenty-six hours' confinement, arrived safely at his destination. On receiving the box, the gentleman had doubts whether he should find a corpse or a living man. He tapped lightly on the box, with the question, "All right?" and was delighted to hear the response, "All right, sir." The poor fellow was immediately liberated from his place of burial.\*

Fig. 7. A wood engraving of the opening of the box in which Brown reached Philadelphia was featured in two consecutive issues of *The Liberty Almanac*, an antislavery publication. In the 1851 edition, the engraving illustrated an article titled, 'Henry Box Brown,' that concluded with the response, 'All right, sir.' In the 1852 almanac, the engraving illustrated 'Emancipation,' a more general polemic that concluded with the story about Brown. *The Liberty Almanac for 1851*, New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1851.



from the testimonial letters has been substituted for Brown's, and his first words are given as 'All right, sir' rather than Brown's un-subservient 'All right.' Brown's confident and assertive phrase has been transposed to 'the [white] gentleman' who released him, a detail not to be found in any of the original editions of Brown's narrative. In fact a subtle switch of viewpoint has been made for the narration of the climactic liberation. The whole thing is seen, not from Brown's viewpoint, but from that of his liberators. First we are given an insight into the suspense and fear of the liberator ('he had doubts whether he should find a corpse or a living man'), then we are given his sensitively proposed question as he 'lightly tapped' the box and said 'All right?', and then an account of his 'delighted' response to hearing Brown's respectful 'All right, sir.' Brown's exodus is not a personal triumph, it is not presented actively at all; Brown is a 'poor fellow' who is 'liberated.' Brown's resurrection is thus seen from the viewpoint of the white abolitionists. He does not resurrect himself, but is 'liberated from his place of burial' by them. This process of appropriation is very thorough; even Brown's renaming in the context of his escape is presented, not as something he generated, or as an act over which he has any control, but as the imposition of white society, an imposition relegated to the position of a final footnote. Again the passive form dominates, Brown has not taken a new name, but 'his name has received an addition.' His name, the name slavery had bestowed on him, has now been updated by a white Northern society and through the remodification of his nomenclature that society claims him for its own. The internecine processes of white appropriation and redefinition seep into Brown's story as it seeps into the popular market. In this context Brown's publication of his own telling of his story two years after that officially sanctioned version and his decision to open his tale to the narrative operations of performance and popular self-advertisement might be seen as both politically responsible and pragmatic.

The same woodcut of Brown's escape was repeated at the bottom of a stirring article in the 1852 edition of *The Liberty*

*Almanac*.<sup>31</sup> This piece, entitled 'EMANCIPATION,' gives a roll call of the most celebrated escaped slaves and celebrates the 'self-emancipation' of 'Pennington, Douglass, Bibb, Brown, and the Crafts.' Brown is given pride of place, the article concluding: 'The escape of Henry *Box* Brown, who was boxed up and forwarded by express to a free State, is well known. Who, on reading such interesting facts, will not exclaim, as Brown did to the kind inquirer to whom the box was consigned, "All right, sir." Here is Brown, leaping from his emancipation-box.'<sup>32</sup> Although it doesn't bear out what we see in the illustration, this last sentence does at least restore Brown as the active and celebratory focus of his own narrative. Even here, however, Brown is still given the strangely formal if not subservient form 'All right, sir.'

The image of Brown's escape had the semiotic fluidity of true popularity. Perhaps the final proof of the extent to which Brown's narrative was transferred into the currencies of popular culture lay in the rapidity with which he was absorbed into the children's book market. Little wood-engravings showing Brown bounding out of the box featured in a variety of children's anti-slavery literature. The absorption of his narrative into *Cousin Ann's Stories for Children* was particularly ingenious, because of the way the plates marry it to a well-established didactic abolition trope.

*Cousin Ann's Stories*, published in Philadelphia in 1849, was a moralistic children's book preaching temperance and antislavery. Slavery is first introduced through an analogy with the capture of animals. This parallelism between slavery and the caging of wild animals was used extensively by the British abolitionists.<sup>33</sup> It also

31. *Liberty Almanac for 1852* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1852), 25.

32. *Liberty Almanac for 1852*, 25.

33. The linking of cruelty to animals with cruelty to slaves in antislave trade publicity goes back to the seventeenth century. Thomas Clarkson drew attention to a central example: 'Dr. Primatt in his "Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy, and on the Sin of Cruelty to Brute-animals," . . . takes occasion to advert to the subject of the African Slave-trade.' *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of The Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London, 1808), 1: 48. Cowper's poetry abounds with comparisons between cruelty to animals and to slaves, the most extended occurring in *The Task*, the most economic being the little epigram written to the *Northampton Mercury*: 'To purify their wine some people bleed / A *Lamb* into the barrel, and succeed; / No Nostrum,



relates to the English satiric tradition, originating in the eighteenth century, where prints, most famously Hogarth's *Four Stages of Cruelty*, made direct comparisons between cruelty to animals and moral depravity and criminality in human society. Abolitionists had taken up the theme in a variety of contexts, and American abolition publications actually reproduced cheap woodcut versions of the Hogarth designs (fig. 8).<sup>34</sup> In *Cousin Ann's Stories* the 'voluntary' self-caging of Henry Box Brown as a means to final liberation is cleverly set against the story of Howard and his pet (fig. 9). The account of Howard is given in verse:

Our Howard had a little squirrel,  
Its tale was long and grey,  
He put it in a wiry cage,  
And there it had to stay.  
Its hickory nuts and corn it ate  
From out its little paw,  
And such a funny active thing,  
I think I never saw.  
But Howard thought he should not like,  
A little slave to be  
And God had made the nimble squirrel,  
To run and climb the tree . . .  
. . . A bird or squirrel in a cage  
It makes me sad to see;  
It seems so cruel to confine  
The creatures made so free<sup>35</sup>

A few pages later follows *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (fig.

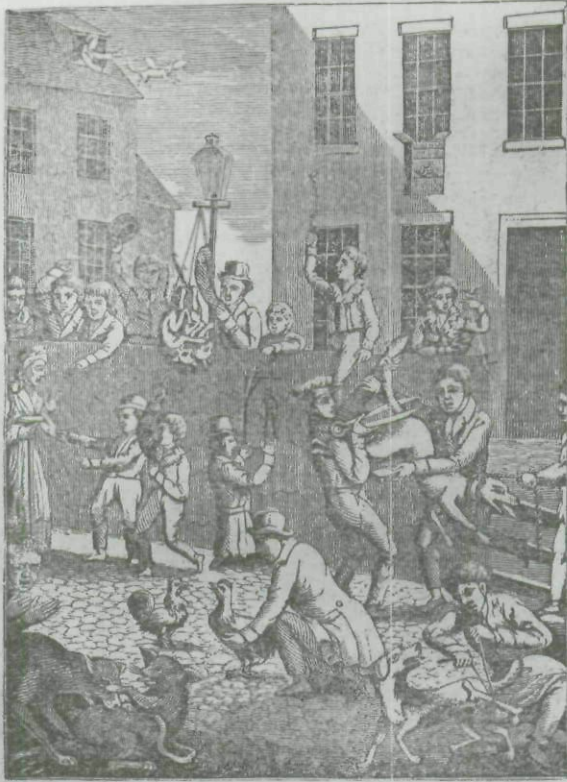
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Planters say, is half so good / To make fine sugar, as a *Negro's* blood. / Now lambs and negroes both are harmless things, / And thence, perhaps, this wond'rous Virtue springs, / 'Tis in the blood of Innocence alone— / Good cause why Planters never try their own.' *Poetical Works of William Cowper*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3: 183.

34. The first and third plates of Hogarth's series were reproduced in crude wood-engraved form in the *Legion of Liberty* (New York: New York Anti-Slavery Society, 1843), unpaginated. For a particularly forceful articulation of the English obsession with the connection between the suffering of slaves and of animals, see the fiery pamphlet by the radical and abolitionist Elizabeth Heyrick, *Cursory Remarks on the Evil Tendency of Unrestrained Cruelty Particularly on that Practiced in Smithfield Market* (London, 1823).

35. Anon., *Cousin Ann's Stories for Children* (Philadelphia, 1849), 12–14.

## PROGRESS OF CRUELTY.



## THE FIRST STAGE OF CRUELTY.

What various scenes of cruel sport  
The infant race employ,  
What future baseness, must import  
The tyrant in the boy.

Behold a youth of gentler look,  
To save the creature's pain,  
'Oh take!' he cries, 'here take my book,'  
But tears and book are vain.

Learn from this fair example, you  
Whom savage sports delight,  
How cruelty disgusts the view,  
While pity charms the sight.

Fig. 8. 'The First Stage of Cruelty,' engraving after William Hogarth. This is a popular wood-engraved version of plate 1, 'The First Stage of Cruelty,' from Hogarth's 1751 series *The Four Stages of Cruelty*. *The Legion of Liberty*, New York: New York Anti-Slavery Society, 1843.





### HOWARD AND HIS SQUIRREL.

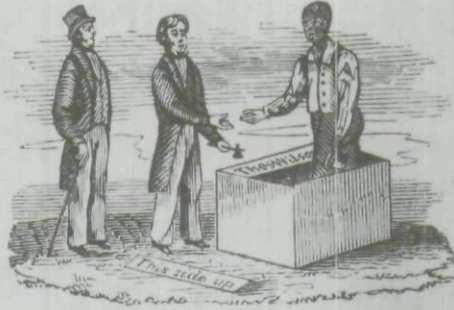
Our Howard had a little squirrel,  
Its tail was long and grey,  
He put it in a wiry cage,  
And there it had to stay.

Its hickory nuts and corn it ate  
From out its little paw,  
And such a funny, active thing,  
I think, I never saw.

But Howard thought he should not like  
A little slave to be;

1D

Fig. 9. 'Howard and His Squirrel,' *Cousin Ann's Stories for Children*, Philadelphia: J. H. McKim, 1849.



## HENRY BOX BROWN.

I will tell you the story of Henry Box Brown. It is a strange tale, and it is all true. Henry was a slave in Richmond, Virginia, and then his name was Henry Brown. He had a wife and four little children whom he loved very much.

One night when he went home to his little hut, his children and their mother, were gone, and poor Henry found they had been sold to a trader, and were taken away to Carolina. It made him almost crazy to hear this dreadful

Fig. 10. 'Henry Box Brown.' In the engraving that illustrates his story as told for children, Brown, holding his top hat in his left hand, emerges from a box addressed to Thomas Wilson with his right hand extended. *Cousin Ann's Stories for Children*, Philadelphia: J. H. McKim, 1849.



10). Most of the tale is in the form of an adventure story detailing his physical hardships in the box. The by now *de rigueur* litany of the precise dimensions of the box is recited and the details of Brown's hardships in transit are provided with an intense eye for detail: 'While on the river boat the box is put on its head, it was placed so that Henry's head and back were down. . . . He lay in this way, while the boat went twenty miles and it nearly killed him, he said the veins in his head were great ridges that felt nearly as big as his finger.'<sup>36</sup> The text accompanying the woodcut illustration and giving an account of his liberation is as follows:

After he had bathed himself and ate breakfast, he sang a hymn of praise, which he had kept in his mind to sing if he should ever get to a land of freedom and safety. The first lines were,

I waited patiently for the Lord  
And he inclined and heard me

Henry was a strong fine looking man. He was named Henry Box Brown because he came nearly three hundred miles in a Box. We call people heroes who do something brave and great, and Henry is a hero. Every body but the slaveholders seems glad of his escape from slavery. Henry will be well off in the free states but his heart will always ache when he thinks of his wife and dear children. No one in Carolina is allowed to teach a child to read or write; so he will never get a letter from any of his family, and it is not likely they will hear from him, or ever know that he is free.<sup>37</sup>

This rearrangement of the narrative firmly replaces Brown center stage, and in its quotation of the opening of his hymn appears to be based directly on a reading of the first English edition. The detail of the bathing and eating of breakfast, however, is entirely innovative. Perhaps the most intriguing addition lies in the way the narrative returns to the theme of Brown's separation from his wife and children in a way in which Brown's own account adamantly refuses to do. The reintroduction of the theme operates powerfully on the woodcut images of Howard and Henry. Brown

36. *Cousin Ann's Stories*, 24.

37. *Cousin Ann's Stories*, 24.

emerges from his box to greet two white men, not his own family. Howard, the free white child, claps as he watches his little squirrel run up the tree, but for Brown's wife and children there is no representation and no liberty.

Brown was proud of what he had done; he was famous for what he had done; and in a very real sense he *was* what he had done. In the *British Library Catalogue of Printed Books* he appears under the heading 'Brown, Henry Box.' The box, and all it stood for, is part of his name. He had brought about the conditions for this re-naming, but had not so named himself; the delighted and genuinely popular audiences of England and America had applied the sobriquet. Brown had overturned, through a single imaginative act, the sober anonymity of the image of the runaway and replaced it with something replete with both mythic grandeur and humor. Contemporary abolitionists were not slow to make comparisons with classical figures, and English children's versions of Brown's narrative make multiple comparisons between Brown's capacities for endurance and those of the ancient Spartans.<sup>38</sup>

If the wider interpretative response to Brown's self-publicity that this piece advocates is adopted, then it is possible to argue that Brown is, artistically, the most forward-looking of all abolitionist propagandists. He had two big experiences, the loss of his family and his subsequent escape from slavery. In marketing this material in the context of abolition he used the full range of media available to him at the time. The panorama, and Brown's was one of the biggest, the lecture, the poetry and music of the plantations, nineteenth-century sentimental verse, prayers, psalms, stage performance, slave narrative, graphic satire, children's books, broadsides, woodcuts and lithographs, packaging (in the

38. The John Rylands Anti-Slavery Collections, Box 7, item 3, no. 9, consists of No. 8 of the 'Juvenile Anti Slavery Series.' This is a retelling for children of the history of Henry Box Brown and carries a crude wood-engraved frontispiece illustration based on the American lithograph showing Henry Box Brown emerging from his crate. The narrative gives the essential facts but constantly seeks to stress Brown's heroism through comparisons with the Spartan and Roman codes of endurance and stoicism. For the comparison of the Runaway with Xenophon's retreat of the 10,000, see the *Anti-Slavery Record*, July 1837, front cover.



form of his box), and the latest technology related to travel. His escape constituted an immediate metaphor that combined spiritual autobiography, resurrection narrative, travel narrative, and farce.

We live in a period where the contemporary visual arts have increasingly explored the didactic potential of performance art. The great German postwar artist Joseph Beuys dominated European performance art in its most overtly political manifestations from the mid-1960s until his death in 1988.<sup>39</sup> Beuys's life and work provide a new perspective from which to consider and understand a little more about the extent of Brown's achievement. When Brown had himself crated up and sent from Bradford to Leeds, reenacting his original escape, he was very close to the methods of Beuys.

One way to read Brown's narrative is as providing a metaphor of hope and healing for nineteenth-century America in much the same way that the work of Beuys provided metaphors of healing for the German, and more widely European and American, people in the 1960s and 1970s as their cultures struggled with the inheritance of the war. Beuys claimed to have located the trauma point of North America in the figure of the Coyote, a deity to the Native American tribes, vermin to the white man. Picked up from the airport in an ambulance, delivered into a cage at a New York gallery, he lived for several days in this cage with a wild coyote. He later lectured on the performance in Glasgow, this time talking the performance through with Jimmy Boyle, Scotland's most wanted man.<sup>40</sup> Brown's body as he travelled north might be seen as an embodiment of the trauma of slavery, and his resurrection to offer a symbol of healing and hope to a society that would have to come to terms with the inheritance of slavery and Civil War. The criticisms of crassness and showmanship levelled against Beuys, by the American and European cultural establishment,

39. For an overview of Beuys's aesthetic theory and performances, see *Joseph Beuys Drawings*, (exh. cat. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983), 11-66.

40. The beautiful photographs documenting the first performance are published in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys Coyote* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1976). For Boyle's account of the performance, see Jimmy Boyle, *A Sense of Freedom* (London: Penguin, 1978), 263.



were not dissimilar from those aimed at Brown. Both men introduced elements of performance and showmanship to their storytelling, and with both men their motives are finally obscure and not innocent of commercial elements. Brown was at one level a public entertainer who made money from his shows. He was also, however, a gifted public educator who offered audiences, on both sides of the Atlantic, exposure to his uniquely varied and inventive slave testimony.

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