

# Division Below the Surface: Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*

To write history is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend.

—Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*

NEARLY EVERY MATERIAL FEATURE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO'S 1789 MEMOIR is, as it happens, interesting—not least so, the equivocal modifier that forms a nearly invisible part of the book's title: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*. Equiano's story appeared at the close of a publishing era that prized true histories and surprising adventures, commercial labels invoking the appetite for wonder or novelty that sustained the English literary marketplace from the time of Daniel Defoe through the opening years of the nineteenth century. Michael McKeon cites Shaftesbury's assault on the "Gothick" taste of early eighteenth-century readers, who sought out "the *Travelling Memoirs of any casual Adventurer*" in the hope of finding stories of "monstrous Brutes" and "yet more *monstrous Men*." Within a few artistic generations, Shaftesbury's term for the outlandish had become wholly naturalized.<sup>1</sup> The years immediately surrounding the outbreak of the French Revolution produced a burst of remarkable "gothic" fiction from the English press, much of which was committed to exploiting the entanglement of narrative and historical processes that Fiona Robertson identifies as the signature of the Gothic imagination.<sup>2</sup>

1. Epigraph from Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953). Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 116–17. The OED traces the evolution of "gothick" from Shaftesbury's disparaging application in the 1710 *Characteristicks* through Johnson's matter-of-fact reference to "Gothick romance" in a letter to Mrs. Thrale of 21 September 1773.

2. *Vathek*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Romance of the Forest*, *The Monk*, and *Caleb Williams* were all published between 1786 and 1796. On the relation of the Gothic sensibility to

Even comparatively judicious writers were not immune to the appeal of narrative extravagance, if not absolute monstrosity. J. Paul Hunter notes that the faithful portrayal of human nature, in Henry Fielding's "History" of a foundling, did not preclude significant doses of the marvelous in *Tom Jones*.<sup>3</sup> Prose fiction routinely exploits both terms in Erich Auerbach's perceptive account of the difficulty confronting the historical imagination: its legends make concessions to history, and its "history" makes concessions to legend. The interweaving is most vividly expressed in novels, perhaps, but among nonfictional forms few books were more suited to these complex and durable representational cravings than the stories that began to emerge from the transatlantic slave trade, during the course of the eighteenth century. Olaudah Equiano's title, however, pointedly avoids invoking the sensational rhetorical elements that characterized the work of his contemporaries, including that of his immediate predecessors in what Henry Louis Gates terms the "black literary tradition."<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, Equiano's introductory letter to the "Lords and Gentlemen" of Parliament alludes to the "horrors" of the slave trade that will form part of his subject, and to the public role that he currently played in the debate over its abolition. His haunting portrait, in the frontispiece of the book, as well as the suggestive nature of his dual names form part of the evocative sociology of Equiano's text: the fusion of the exotic and the historical that his complex identities imply.<sup>5</sup> These preliminary physical and verbal features of his story indicate that it had already secured a measure of advance "interest," if not as a "gothick" then certainly as an improbable product of

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history, see Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 68–116.

3. J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990) 208–17.

4. Compare Equiano's title to that of his immediate precursors: Briton Hammon, *A narrative of the uncommon sufferings, and surprizing deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro man* (1760), James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince* (1770) and Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of the slavery and commerce of the human species: humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great-Britain by Ottobah Cugoano, a native of Africa* (1787). Cugoano and Gronniosaw, along with Equiano, first established the tradition that Henry Louis Gates describes in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

5. See D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (New York and London: Cambridge UP, 1999). According to James Olney, many of the features of Equiano's title page make it the paradigm of slave autobiography, including the engraved frontispiece portrait, the emphasis on renaming, and the express stipulation that the narrative was "written by himself." See "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46–73.

the cultural collisions associated with an imperial age. Under the circumstances, Equiano's choice of title is all the more remarkable. To a striking degree, his book invites its audience (initially at least) to take some interest in "interesting," a word that was in the process of acquiring new, subjective meanings in the years that Olaudah Equiano was adjusting to his English name in an English world. Through the medium of this seemingly equivocal invitation, Equiano's narrative begins to address its profound ethical and documentary burdens.

"It remains significant," Raymond Williams suggests, "that our most general words for attraction or involvement should have developed from a formal objective term in property and finance." This observation concludes Williams' brief account of the etymology of "interest" in *Keywords*.<sup>6</sup> The original legal and monetary definitions that Williams notes, designating "interest" as the possession of a "share" in some material right or value, only began to acquire wider cognitive and moral significance in the mid-eighteenth century. Williams speculates that all modern permutations of the word remain "saturated" with their economic origins—a suggestion with which William Empson takes issue, in the third edition of *The Structure of Complex Words*. All references to "interest," Empson insists in his preface, are not held hostage to etymological puns, except where a given writer appears to solicit the blend of older meanings with newer ones.<sup>7</sup> Just such a situation would appear to occur in the opening words of Olaudah Equiano's memoir, offering the conventional apology of "a private and obscure individual" who is about to embark upon a long, autobiographical narrative.

It is evident from the book's front-matter that this will be no ordinary story, but Equiano pretends to some doubt about whether his pages will prove "sufficiently interesting to engage general attention."<sup>8</sup> He has gone to the considerable trouble of producing them, however, both to satisfy the demands of his friends and to promote "the interest of humanity": "Permit me, with the greatest deference and respect," Equiano asks, in his prefatory letter to Parliament, "to lay at your feet the following genuine Narrative; the chief design of which is to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my un-

6. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 173.

7. William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, third edition (Totowa, New Jersey: Roman and Littlefield, 1979).

8. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1995) 31. Page numbers in parenthesis, identifying passages from Equiano's book, refer to this edition.

fortunate countrymen" (7). Equiano undertakes to be "interesting" in the larger "interest" of humanity, to assert a subjective claim in the service of objective ends. That is the simplest way of describing his purposes but the description is scarcely as simple as it seems.

For one thing, an interesting narrative does not necessarily establish a profound subjective claim. The curiosity that it arouses may be purely superficial. That is exactly how Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, viewed a representative passage in Equiano's opening chapter. Writing in *The Analytical Review*, two months after the publication of Equiano's book, Wollstonecraft offered a brief account of its appeal, reprinting an "extract" that she believed would "not be unacceptable to our readers."<sup>9</sup> In the passage that she selected, Equiano is describing some of the customs of his West African homeland. "We are," he wrote, "almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets":

Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion. The assembly is separated into four divisions, which dance either apart or in succession, and each with a character peculiar to itself. The first division contains the married men, who in their dances frequently exhibit feats of arms, and the representation of a battle. To these succeed the married women, who dance in the second division. The young men occupy the third; and the maidens the fourth. Each represents some interesting scene of real life, such as a great achievement, domestic employment, a pathetic story, or some rural sport; and as the subject is generally founded on some recent event, it is therefore ever new. This gives our dances a spirit and variety which I have scarcely seen elsewhere. We have many musical instruments, particularly drums of different kinds, a piece of music which resembles a guitar, and another much like a stickado. These last are chiefly used by betrothed virgins, who play on them on all grand festivals. (34)

Wollstonecraft singles out this language because, in her judgment, it falls into a specific category of interest: the "not unacceptable," as opposed to the "flat," "childish," "puerile," "tiresome," "solid," "well written," or "very interesting" literary specimens that form what, to her, is the rather puzzling and discontinuous texture of Equiano's book (28).<sup>10</sup>

9. Mary Wollstonecraft, [Untitled Review], *The Analytical Review* 4 (May 1789): 27–29. Carretta reprints most of Wollstonecraft's review in his edition of the *Interesting Narrative* xxvi–xxvii.

10. See Helen Thomas' brief account of Wollstonecraft's mixed response to Equiano's book in *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 88–89.

The sensational accounts of West Indian persecution, in Equiano's pages, are (according to Wollstonecraft) "simply told," and perhaps for this very reason "make the blood turn its course." But such passages are presumably too disturbing (or already too familiar) to English readers to explore in a brief book review. Instead this ethnographic anecdote catches Wollstonecraft's eye. Her review even preserves Equiano's curious footnote, comparing his childhood memory to an episode from his adult travels: "When I was in Smyrna I have frequently seen the Greeks dance after this manner." This incidental connection too, as Wollstonecraft might have noted, is not uninteresting, but it is scarcely the kind of disclosure to turn the course of the blood. Geraldine Murphy observes that a number of contemporary anti-slavery tracts sought to celebrate the dignity of African societies with similar claims of hidden affinity to European cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Equiano's words, however, may well turn the course of the reader's mind to unexpected sources of interest. Part of his intent, in this first chapter, is to stress the cultural implications of Paul's announcement to the Athenians, in Acts 17, that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (45). In particular, Equiano emphasizes "the strong analogy" that he detects between certain customs of the ancient Jews and some of the practices that he recalls witnessing in his West African childhood. The rites of circumcision, regular sacrifices and burnt offerings, "our washings and purifications" all seem, to Equiano, common to both peoples, as do certain features of their patriarchal law. Three contemporary biblical scholars (he notes) appear to corroborate the link. Skin color is an obvious difference between "Eboan Africans and the modern Jews," Equiano concedes, but like many of his European contemporaries he suspects that it may be only a superficial one, derived from climate rather than from some deeper, interior source.<sup>12</sup> He weaves an extract from the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society into his narrative in order to emphasize the mutability of the human complexion and to confront the intractable prejudices of his European readers: "Let such reflections as these melt the pride of their superiority into sympathy for the wants and miseries of their sable brethren, and compel them to acknowledge, that understanding is not confined to feature or colour" (45). Equiano is only too aware that he is preaching to an audience of cultural imperialists not unlike Paul's complacent Greeks.

Judging from the tone of her early review, Mary Wollstonecraft's cultural pride did not reach its melting point. The *Interesting Narrative*, she ob-

11. Geraldine Murphy, "Olaudah Equiano, Accidental Tourist," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1994): 551-68.

12. On the prevailing, climatic theories of race, in the eighteenth century, see Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000).

served, was certainly a contemporary curiosity which, if it did not obliterate the “stigma” of race, nevertheless proved that its author was at least as accomplished as “the general mass of men, who fill the subordinate stations in a more civilized society”—hairdressers, for example, merchant clerks, or musicians, if not sailors (28). These are the social “stations” to which Equiano lays explicit claim during the course of his story, though all are clearly at odds with the historical identity that he finally assumes: petitioner to Parliament, advocate for abolition, writer. Wollstonecraft’s patronizing response is clearly not the transformative moral result that Equiano hoped to effect. A documentary account of the atrocities of slavery may stir the reader’s blood but leave the entrenched assumptions of prejudice intact. During his description of slave life in the West Indies, Equiano acknowledges that a “catalogue” of all the instances of “oppression, extortion, and cruelty” that he had witnessed would only succeed in being “tedious and disgusting” (113). Readers are as vulnerable as slave holders to the effects of systematic desensitization. A change in deep-seated cultural attitudes could only take place through avenues of interest that deliberately avoided taxing (and perhaps exhausting) the reader’s powerful feelings.

One attempt at exploring such avenues—admittedly not a very successful one, to judge from Wollstonecraft’s response—occurs in the identical passage depicting the dances of the Eboan people with which Wollstonecraft concludes her notice in *The Analytical Review*. Equiano’s passing comparison to the dancing of the Greeks was almost certainly intended to suggest yet another “strong analogy” linking African experience to the literary culture of the English reader. He touches on a central episode from Homer’s *Odyssey* that dramatizes, at several points, the mysteriously integrative power of interest. This connection is not as strained as it might seem. For the eighteenth-century English reader, Pope’s translations of Homer served the same, triumphal purposes that Chapman’s had for the Elizabethans: they appropriated two great monuments of ancient genius to the contemporary language of imperial sway. And they answered the implicit challenge posed by Madame Dacier’s 1711 and 1716 translations of the Homeric poems into French prose.<sup>13</sup>

13. For Pope’s strictures on the translations of his predecessors, see his “Preface” to *The Iliad of Homer* in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 12 vols., ed. Maynard Mack et. al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967): 7: 21–22. Hereafter cited as Pope with volume and page. Pope’s attitude toward Madame Dacier’s work is largely respectful, but it is complicated by his response to her criticism of a French translation of Pope’s “Preface” to the *Iliad*. See Pope’s “Postscript” to *The Odyssey of Homer* in *The Poems of Alexander Pope* 10: 391–97, where he concludes by identifying Homer’s poems and the English Constitution as “the best that ever human wit invented . . . we despise any *French* or *English* man whatever, who shall presume to retrench, to innovate, or to make the least alteration in either.” This assertion underscores Srinivas Aravamudan’s account of the link between English literary culture and the country’s “pas-

In the course of his own famously protracted wanderings, Ulysses encounters a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets, to whom Equiano's gifted Eboans bear a striking resemblance. These are the Phaeacians, who without any knowledge of Ulysses' identity or his past welcome him to their court, solicit his participation in their "rural sports," and ultimately draw from him the story of his adventures that occupies books nine through twelve of *The Odyssey*. Alcinous, the Phaeacian king, briefly suspects that the spectacular suppliant who suddenly materializes at his wife's feet may be a god, intent on testing the piety of men. But the king quickly embraces the unconditional obligations of hospitality, founded (as Pope's translation stresses) not on the interest that earthly rulers understandably have in placating gods in disguise but on the common bonds of human suffering:

For Fate has wove the thread of life with pain,  
And twins ev'n from the birth, are misery and man!  
(Pope 9: 248)

The Phaeacians are richly endowed with cultural gifts, evident in the splendid architecture of Alcinous' palace, in its paradisaic gardens, and in the remarkable fabrics produced by the Phaeacian women, but dancing and poetic song form their chief distinction. Alcinous affirms this pre-eminence when he asks for a dance in order to soothe Ulysses' temporary resentment after one of the young nobles at the Phaeacian court accuses him of being no better than a shipwrecked merchant, "Some mean sea-farer in pursuit of gain." "Let other realms the deathful gauntlet wield," Alcinous announces:

Or boast the glories of th' athletic field;  
We in the course unrival'd speed display,  
Or thro' cerulean billows plow the way:  
To dress, to dance, to sing our sole delight,  
The feast or bath by day, and love by night:  
Rise then ye skill'd in measures: let him bear  
Your fame to men that breathe a distant air:  
And faithful say, to you the pow'rs belong  
To race, to sail, to dance, to chaunt the song.  
(Pope 9: 278)

The subject of the ensuing performance, by Phaeacia's dancers, is Vulcan's triumph over the adulterous passions of Mars and Venus, through the marvelous net that he makes in order to trap the lovers and expose their guilt.

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sionate nationalistic claims." See *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1608-1804* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1999) 233-34.

“Art subdues the strong,” the gods conclude, before convincing Vulcan to release his victims.

In the notes to Pope’s popular edition, William Broome assures eighteenth-century readers that Homer did not intend to offer the Phaeacians as examples of an admirable nation; they are (Broome declares) a voluptuous rather than a manly people, more French than English in their cultural sympathies.<sup>14</sup> But Ulysses is filled with wonder at their artistic and athletic skill, praising the dance that he witnesses and almost immediately confirming, in his own person, the power of art to subdue the strong. The Phaeacian bard Demodocus repeatedly reduces Ulysses to tears when he sings about the siege of Troy, a response that eventually prompts Alcinous to interrogate his mysterious guest, eliciting the tale of Ulysses’ adventures that occupies the next four books of the poem. This sympathetic hearing from the lords and gentlemen of an ancient kingdom may have encouraged Equiano as he made his own, atavistic appeal to the “august assemblies” of the English Parliament by placing his “genuine Narrative” at their feet.

The leap from Equiano’s account of Eboan dance to the court of Phaeacia in *The Odyssey* is anything but obvious—though one wonders whether Wollstonecraft’s acute sensibility may have detected it as she framed her review. Smyrna, the city to which Equiano pointedly refers in the footnote that Wollstonecraft retains, is one of two chief claimants to be the birthplace of Homer.<sup>15</sup> By contrast with such furtive links, the “strong analogy” between African and Jewish culture that Equiano draws is very much in the open, buttressed with biblical passages underscoring the implications of his claim that cultures and peoples are not hermetically sealed off from one another. Equiano’s candor risks the direct resistance of contemporary readers who might be disinclined to credit the fancies of a handful of theologians, the speculations of a correspondent of the Royal Society, and the biblical exegesis of a former slave. Deeper and more durable reservoirs of interest might be responsive to subtler appeals of the kind that Ulysses’ natural guile leads him to deploy in circumstances where a forthright claim might prove futile or dangerous. This elusive dimension to human receptivity lies behind the newly inflected significance of the term “interesting” that Laurence Sterne first explores in *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, two decades before the publication of Equiano’s book.

This second associative and textual leap may seem every bit as far-

14. Broome’s implication is that the Phaeacians call to mind the decadent features of French culture, a fact that explains Madame Dacier’s favorable comments on the Phaeacian court. See Pope 9: 260, 278.

15. Pope noted the proliferation of claims to the status of Homer’s birthplace but concluded that “the Weight of the Question seems to lie between *Smyrna* and *Chios*.” See Pope 7: 44.



fetched as the first. It rests initially on Sterne's application of "interesting" first to a forehead and then to a haunting face that his narrator, Yorick, encounters in a coach yard at Calais. By chance, Yorick abruptly finds himself waiting at the door of a coach house, holding the hand of an intriguing lady traveler who had briefly caught his eye, a few moments earlier, as he drafted a preface for his book in the cab of an old *desobligeant*.<sup>16</sup> He immediately begins to construct the identity and the past of his mysterious companion:

I had not yet seen her face—'twas not material; for the drawing was instantly set about, and long before we had got to the door of the Remise, *Fancy* had finished the whole head, and pleased herself as much with its fitting her goddess, as if she had dived into the Tiber for it. . . . When we had got to the door of the Remise, she withdrew her hand from across her forehead, and let me see the original—it was a face of about six and twenty—of a clear transparent brown, simply set off without rouge or powder—it was not critically handsome, but there was that in it, which in the frame of mind I was in, attached me much more to it—it was interesting; I fancied it wore the characters of a widow'd look, and in that state of its declension, which had passed the two first paroxysms of sorrow, and was quietly beginning to reconcile itself to its loss—but a thousand other distresses might have traced the same lines; I wish'd to know what they had been—and was ready to enquire, (had the same *bon ton* of conversation permitted, as in the days of Esdras)—'What aileth thee? and why art thou disquieted? and why is thy understanding troubled?'—In a word, I felt benevolence for her; and resolved some way or other to throw in my mite of courtesy—if not of service.<sup>17</sup>

The editors of the OED cite this passage as the earliest illustrative use of the word "interesting" to mean "adapted to excite interest," to arouse curiosity, attention, or emotion—a rich subjective array of connotations that are quite new to eighteenth-century English diction. The worldly and materialistic etymology to which Raymond Williams calls attention drops away in favor of meanings that are (as Sterne quietly implies) "not material."<sup>18</sup>

It is not necessary to establish a direct connection between Sterne's book

16. See Melinda Rabb's discussion of the paradigmatic import of this scene: "Engendering Accounts in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*," in *Johnson and His Age*, Harvard English Studies 12, ed. James Engell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984): 531–58.

17. Lawrence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, ed. Ian Jack (New York and London: Oxford UP, 1968) 17.

18. Martin Battestin identifies Sterne's fondness for puns on "material," aimed at his acquaintances in d'Holbach's circle of philosophical materialists. See "Sterne Among the *Philosophes*: Body and Soul in *A Sentimental Journey*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 7 (1994): 17–36.

and Equiano's in order to detect provocative parallels between the ways that each handles the gradual, if imperfect, recognition of human affinities. An equally compelling face—young, dark, simply set off against the conventional costume of eighteenth-century gentility—presides at the threshold of Equiano's story [fig. 1]. Like the image that Yorick contemplates, Equiano's features too suggest a complex state of disquietude, a story that requires to be told. As the first chapter of his narrative will disclose, Equiano is kidnapped and sold into slavery before the age at which he would have been subjected to the ritual scarring that his sex and family rank required: the thickened weal of tissue formed across the brows by cutting the skin at the edge of the scalp, drawing it down, and holding it in place until it shrinks into the *embrenche*, "a mark of grandeur" among the Eboan people (32–33). The meticulous description of this strangely displaced form of circumcision augments the impact of the engraved portrait at the beginning of Equiano's book, giving it the appearance of an "original" countenance, cut off from a cultural heritage to be sure but at the same time unscarred by a prescribed identity.<sup>19</sup> It forms a suggestive entanglement of human possibility and of loss, an enigmatic emblem of the costs and the opportunities latent in Equiano's story.

This perception of experiential depth is both an attribute and a theme of the *Interesting Narrative*. Caricatures of happy servitude are very much on Equiano's mind as he drafts his memoir. They partly explain the emphasis that he places on the expressive range and ambition that lay behind the dances that he witnessed during his Eboan childhood. These were in no sense escapist frolics of the kind that Sterne associates with the antics of Yorick's servant, La Fleur. "Happy people!" Yorick exclaims of La Fleur and his companions on their Paris holiday, "that once a week at least are sure to lay down all your cares together; and dance and sing and sport away the weights of grievance, which bow down the spirit of other nations to the earth" (Sterne 101). Equiano's response to such assumptions is filtered through the invidious medium provided by still another contemporary book, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in London two years before the first edition of Equiano's memoir. In Jefferson's hands, Sterne's stereotype takes on monstrous dimensions, becoming an impenetrable and disturbing "veil of black" that thwarts Jefferson's scrutiny of the emotional and intellectual lives of his slaves. Their imaginations, he declares, are "dull, tasteless, and anomalous," incapable of cultivation or improvement: "never yet did I find that a black had uttered a thought above

19. The portrait does, however, suggest an uncanny relation between Equiano's elaborately ruffled shirt linen and his physical description of the *embrenche*. Ritual "dress" is a conventional badge of status, much like the ritual disfigurement that Equiano describes. Folds of flesh and folds of fabric are, in some measure, equivalent cultural expressions.

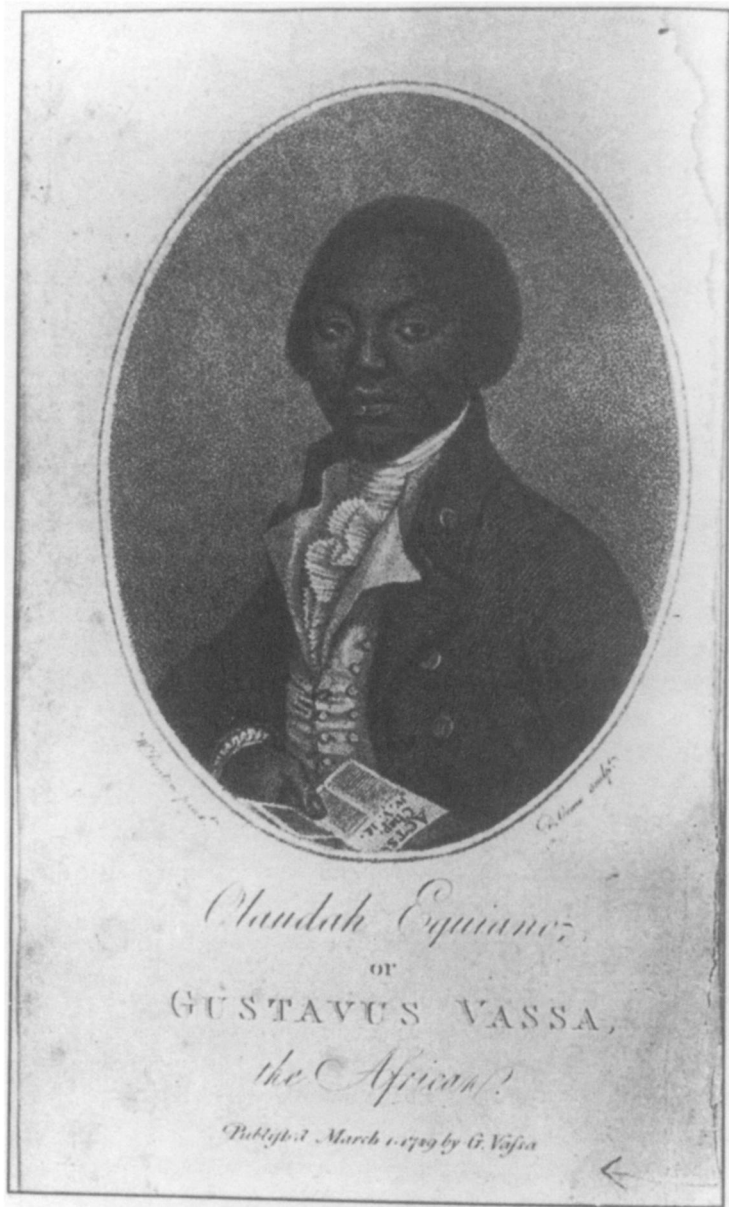


Fig. 1: Portrait from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London, 1789).

the level of plain narration." Neither misery nor religion can prompt them to poetry. Their inextinguishable love of amusements, their fondness for simple melodies, their immersion in lives of mere sensation, Jefferson believes, insulate them from the kind of private grief or historical anxiety that he appears to attach exclusively to European experience.<sup>20</sup>

The comparison between Equiano's memoir and Laurence Sterne's fictive exploration of the mechanisms of human interest is admittedly speculative. But it is highly unlikely that Equiano could have overlooked Thomas Jefferson's anguished reflections on the problem of abolition in this portion of *Notes on the State of Virginia* at a time when Equiano was so closely identified with the struggle to abolish the English slave trade. Jefferson too finds occasion to cite Pope's popular translation of *The Odyssey*, as evidence that the condition of enslavement itself, rather than class or race, explains the dehumanizing impact of bondage:

Jove fix'd it certain, that whatever day  
Makes man a slave, takes half his worth away.

(Jefferson 142)

But Jefferson never attempts to reconcile the humane implications of these words with the manifest inhumanity of the passages in his book that precede them. The contradiction is a perceptual veil in its own right, capturing in vivid terms Jefferson's painful ambivalence over race. When Equiano paraphrases these same lines from Homer in his impassioned address to the community of West Indian planters at the close of his fifth chapter, he knows precisely how to apply their energies: "When you make men slaves," he insists:

you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them, in your own conduct, an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they are not honest or faithful! You stupify them with stripes, and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning; that their minds are such a barren soil or moor, that culture would be lost on them; and that they come from a climate, where nature (though prodigal of her bounties in a degree unknown to yourselves) has left man alone scant and unfinished, and

20. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1954) 139. I have argued elsewhere for Jefferson's deliberate exposure of his own racist consciousness as part of the complex rhetorical ambition of his book. See "Subterranean Virginia: The Ethical Poetics of Thomas Jefferson," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33 (1999-2000): 233-49.

incapable of enjoying the treasures she has poured out for him! An assertion at once impious and absurd. (111–12).

This indictment makes astute use of the logical absurdities in Jefferson's racial attitudes by exposing those attitudes to the same skeptical interrogation for which Jefferson himself is celebrated. Even so, the terms of Equiano's attack are deceptively transparent. Once the initial, catastrophic "fraud" takes place—giving "one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend"—master and slave find themselves locked in a self-defeating embrace, stripped of their inherent human virtues and forced to live in what Equiano pointedly characterizes as a state of intimate antagonism: a household of enemies. The complex, allusive texture grows denser still when, within a sentence or two of the passage cited above, Equiano commits the startling impiety of adapting the voice of Beelzebub from *Paradise Lost* to express the righteous resentment of his fellow slaves:

. . . No peace is given  
To us enslav'd, but custody severe;  
And stripes and arbitrary punishment  
Inflicted—What peace can we return?  
But to our power, hostility and hate;  
Untam'd reluctance, and revenge, tho' slow,  
Yet ever plotting how the conqueror least  
May reap his conquest, and may least rejoice  
In doing what we most in suff'ring feel.

(112)

Plain narration this plainly is not. But neither is it simply an instance of the "unequal" or unpolished style that many of Equiano's first readers believed that they found in his pages. To narrate the impieties and absurdities of the eighteenth-century slave trade would require language capable of accommodating its incommensurable elements.

The favorable letters and notices that Equiano included in the front matter to later editions of his memoir frequently cite "the artless manner" in which the story is written or the "simplicity" of Equiano's prose—euphemisms intended to reassure the English reader that the book's language, ornamented though it is with snippets from the Bible and from *Paradise Lost*, is sufficiently clumsy to be credible as the genuine work of an anglicized African. Richard Gough's comments in *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, however, were too blunt to be of much use as a testimonial. Equiano's style was "very unequal," Gough wrote, his entire second volume was categorically

“uninteresting,” and the author’s conversion to Methodism was so unpalatable that it “oversets the whole.” Mary Wollstonecraft agreed about the unfortunate impact of Methodism on Equiano’s story. She agreed, too, that there was what she termed “a kind of contradiction” in the book’s narrative fabric. The level of authorial acuity seemed inexplicably uneven, Wollstonecraft thought, and the prose itself was correspondingly erratic: “a few well written periods do not smoothly unite with the general tenor of the language.”<sup>21</sup> Key passages did not articulate with one another.

Neither Wollstonecraft nor Gough links these reservations to the problem of narrative authenticity that continues to complicate the reception of Equiano’s work.<sup>22</sup> They express no doubts that Equiano wrote his own story, largely in his own words, or that the substance of that story was true. But they point to a puzzling feature of his book—one that modern readers, too, are often reluctant to address, in part because questions about expressive or representational properties take on the appearance of quibbling in the presence of a text that addresses matters of great moral and historical urgency.

Equiano, however, appears to invite a measure of quibbling. Some of the instances in which he does so are, perhaps, less consequential than others. Why, for instance, are the Eboan Africans among whom Equiano was born—a people that he portrays as hardy, affable, and “undebauched” in all aspects of their communal life—so plagued with the crime of poisoning? He presents this anomaly in his opening chapter but devotes virtually no attention to its implications, despite his detailed account of the success of the magical tactics that the Eboan priests routinely adopt for the detecting of poisoners (42). On two occasions, during his journey to the sea, Equiano is sold to African masters who appear to treat him with special favor—the first a goldsmith and the second “a wealthy widow,” who apparently intends Equiano as a companion for her son, “a young gentleman about my own age and size” (52). Both of these new situations come to abrupt, inexplicable ends, the second just as Equiano has drawn the reassuring conclu-

21. Compare the Gough and Wollstonecraft reviews in the introduction to Vincent Carretta’s edition: *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* xxv–xxvii.

22. Vincent Carretta offers the most recent challenge to Equiano’s credibility in “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century question of Identity,” *Slavery and Abolition* 20 (December 1999): 96–105. S. E. Ogude argues that the first chapter of the *Interesting Narrative* is a complete fiction that Equiano assembled from contemporary travel narratives. See “Facts into Fiction: Equiano’s Narrative Reconsidered,” *Research in African Literatures*, 13 (Spring 1982): 31–43. David Brion Davis finds these discussions decisive in his review of Peter Linebaugh’s and Marcus Rediker’s recent study, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon P, 2000). Linebaugh and Rediker, by contrast, accept Equiano’s account of his life as largely truthful. See *The New York Review of Books* 48 (July 5, 2001): 54.

sion that he was about to be adopted into the family. These sudden changes are, in some ways, more unsettling than Equiano's original kidnapping. They seem unmotivated freaks of circumstance, rather than the products of callousness or greed. What could explain them? Equiano makes no effort to suggest an answer.

Among the "small remains of comfort" that he reports he loses, when he first arrives in Barbados, are the attentions of the slave women who had accompanied him on board ship and who are rather quickly sold away to various island masters. These women, "who used to wash and take care of me," Equiano writes, "were all gone different ways, and I never saw one of them afterwards" (62). What were their names? Where, in Africa, had they come from? If Equiano recalls such details, he does not preserve them, and yet the glimpse that he offers of the persistence of such surrogate parenting, on board a slave vessel and in the slave markets of the West Indies, is a startling disclosure. Why, too, does the separation by sale of a group of brothers, brought to Barbados on the same slave ship with Equiano, prompt his angry rebuke to the "nominal Christians" who tolerate such atrocities, while the dispersal of the women who so lovingly tended him goes largely unremarked, except as a deprivation of personal comfort?

These may not be the sorts of contradictions and inequalities, in Equiano's book, that troubled Wollstonecraft and Gough, but they form an increasingly conspicuous element in the texture of the experience that he records. In some measure, certainly, they reflect the fact that Equiano was only ten years old when he was kidnapped. Despite his efforts to reconstruct his African and Caribbean past using a variety of published sources, signs of his imperfect memory are unavoidable. In the absence of any acknowledgment of such narrative difficulties on Equiano's part, however, these fissures acquire subtle powers of implication. They resemble calculated and disturbing breaks in the story's signifying chain—like those "passages that lead to nothing" which Fiona Robertson traces in the Gothic novel, they offer little or no transition between a child's limited grasp of the circumstances shaping his world and the more penetrating understanding of an adult (Robertson 68).

A particularly conspicuous instance of this disorienting narrative effect occurs as Equiano records what he calls "a trifling incident" that took place while he was spending several months, between sea voyages, on the Isle of Wight:

I was one day in a field belonging to a gentleman who had a black boy about my own size; this boy having observed me from his master's house, was transported at the sight of one of his own countrymen, and ran to meet me with the utmost haste. I not knowing what he was

about, turned a little out of his way at first, but to no purpose; he soon came close to me, and caught hold of me in his arms as if I had been his brother, though we had never seen each other before. After we had talked together for some time, he took me to his master's house, where I was treated very kindly. This benevolent boy and I were very happy in frequently seeing each other, till about the month of March 1761, when our ship had orders to fit out again for another expedition. When we got ready, we joined a very large fleet at Spithead, commanded by Commodore Keppel, destined against Belle-Isle; and having a number of transport ships in company, with troops on board, to make a descent on the place, we sailed once more in quest of fame. I longed to engage in new adventure, and to see fresh wonders. (85)

The reverberations of this encounter (as most readers recognize) are anything but trifling. The quest for fresh wonders and adventure, to which Equiano turns at the end of this passage, invokes the conventional categories of interest that eighteenth-century publishers were most inclined to exploit in their efforts to attract readers. Equiano clearly implies that his brief period of intimacy with a nameless African boy is not similarly (or profitably) interesting. "I had a mind on which everything uncommon made its full impression," he assures the reader, as he immediately prepares to record some of the singular incidents of the Belle-Isle expedition. Yet this uncommon interlude of kindness amidst the violence of Equiano's naval career would appear to be of negligible importance. Sentiment and sensation collide in this passage—much as Equiano's ship, the *Aetna*, and the *Lynne* shortly do during the Belle-Isle voyage, leaving the *Aetna* in such a "crazy condition" that she has to be held together with hawsers and tallow as she limps into port. The conjunction between narrative practice and narrative content seems more than simply fortuitous.

These passages fall at a critical point in Equiano's story, just after a fierce engagement off Gibraltar, in which Equiano and another powder boy repeatedly risk their lives to keep their gun supplied with ammunition, and just before Equiano's curiosity to watch the charging of the English mortars at Belle-Isle nearly gets him killed. On this occasion, too, he "and another boy who was along with me" barely escape the French shot. Before the meeting with his benevolent double, on the Isle of Wight, Equiano approaches such experiences as a fatalist, "cheering myself with the reflection that there was a time allotted for me to die as well as to be born" (84). The echo of Ecclesiastes is certainly deliberate, but so is the suggestion of a measure of stoic resignation that seems completely independent of conventional religious significance. After the Isle of Wight interlude, Equiano re-



peatedly stresses "the interposition of Providence" in the events that he witnesses and in the circumstances of his own survival (85–87).

The shift in emphasis is anything but dramatic and far from consistent in its effects. Indeed, precisely where one might expect Equiano's evangelical faith to upset the whole (as Richard Gough insists that it does) it begins instead to play a distinctly equivocal role in the narrative, becoming increasingly pervasive and increasingly dysfunctional as an interpretive tool.<sup>23</sup> When Equiano's once-benevolent master, Michael Pascal, abruptly sells him to a ship captain bound for Montserrat, for instance, the victim of this gross betrayal of trust unhesitatingly attributes it to "a judgment of Heaven," in punishment for his impulsive habit of swearing—a ludicrous application of providentialist thinking (95). A few pages later, a visit to the active volcano known as Brimstone Hill, in Montserrat, prompts Equiano to draw no providential implications whatever from this ominous spot or from the earthquakes that he subsequently experiences in the vicinity of the mountain. Few places in Equiano's experience are more suitable candidates for a divine onslaught with fire and brimstone than Montserrat, but he pointedly avoids such an apocalyptic analysis precisely where circumstances would seem to require it. Instead, Equiano boils some potatoes in the thermal springs on Brimstone Hill and notes that the sulphurous fumes on the summit turn silver shoe buckles "black as lead" (114). A stop at Vesuvius, much later in his career, proves equally anticlimactic, from a rhetorical point of view, despite Equiano's anger at the institution of galley-slavery that he finds thriving in Naples and elsewhere in Italy (169).

Like the encounter with the "benevolent boy" on the Isle of Wight, these passages seem deliberately designed to elicit and then immediately to thwart the reader's integrative inclinations—the latent desire to tie a narrative together, to make its parts articulate. The experience is not unlike Equiano's own anger and frustration when he learns, from one of his religious counselors, that saving grace is utterly discontinuous with the scrupulous (if imperfect) efforts that he had been making to keep the Ten Commandments. "The law is a school-master to bring us to Christ," one of his informants assures him, but the law is not a substitute for the mysterious inner change that Equiano seeks (186). At first "puzzled" and "wounded" by these disclosures, Equiano ultimately reacts much as the *Aetna* did in its collision with the *Lynne*: "I staggered much at this sort of doctrine," he ad-

23. Srinivas Aravamudan rightly points to the confused nature of Equiano's religious development—his tendency to mix up his loyalties to charismatic Methodism and to Anglicanism—though the conclusion that Aravamudan draws from this sectarian tangle seems extreme: that Equiano's efforts to craft a spiritual autobiography crumble under the strain. See *Tropicopolitans* 240–44.

mits, confused and angry at the gap that suddenly opens between works and faith. Only his own, inexplicable religious transformation one October evening in Cadiz harbor ultimately convinces him that the Bible can only “talk” when its reader has been miraculously equipped to “listen.” In some measure, Equiano structures the reading experience to replicate this gap between textual foreground and textual background, between nominal and essential interpretive powers.

Erich Auerbach’s stylistic metaphors—the concepts of foreground and background that he employs to distinguish Homeric from biblical storytelling—are particularly pertinent to this feature of Equiano’s language. The representational fields of the *Interesting Narrative* are nearly identical to those that Auerbach contrasts to one another in “Odysseus’ Scar,” the opening chapter of *Mimesis*: a world of militant public display, on the one hand, and of agonized religious introspection on the other. The characteristics of narrative foreground that Auerbach identifies in Homer’s verse preclude implicit or residual meanings. Full illumination is the most distinctive feature of Greek epic, Auerbach argues, completely externalized action and motive, “never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths.” “As a social picture,” he continues, “this world is completely stable . . . nothing ever pushes up from below” (6–7, 21).

The second of the representational worlds that Auerbach examines operates on quite different principles. Biblical narrative, unlike its Homeric contemporary, cultivates an atmosphere of imperfect disclosure, leaving events and human agents “fraught with background,” filled with a sense of latency that creates a vivid impression of moral and psychological depth. Homer “remains within the legendary,” Auerbach notes, but Old Testament stories increasingly become histories, involving all the cross-currents and friction, the “unresolved, truncated, and uncertain” elements characteristic of historical contingency. “Historical themes in general,” he adds, require of a writer an aptitude for coping with the inexplicable and unpredictable reserves of meaning that comprise non-legendary experience:

The historical event which we witness, or learn from the testimony of those who witnessed it, runs much more variously, contradictorily, and confusedly, not until it has produced results in a definite domain are we able, with their help, to classify it to a certain extent; and how often the order to which we think we have attained becomes doubtful again, how often we ask ourselves if the data before us have not led us to a far too simple classification of the original events! . . . the historical comprises a great number of contradictory motives in each individual, a hesitation and ambiguous groping on the part of groups; only seldom . . . does a more or less plain situation, comparatively simple to

describe, arise, and even such a situation is subject to division below the surface, is indeed almost constantly in danger of losing its simplicity; and the motives of all the interested parties are so complex that the slogans of propaganda can be composed only through the crudest simplification. . . . To write history is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend. (19–20)

The concessions that Equiano makes are largely those evocations of providential oversight and intercession appropriate to the religious “legend” within which he casts his experience. In the Isle of Wight episode, however, divisions below the surface abruptly produce a “transported” boy, “about my own size,” whose evocative presence promptly threatens the simplicity of Equiano’s story.

These transports are textual as well as emotional in their nature—a lifting out and a blending of one child’s narrative being with that of the two anonymous companions who share Equiano’s military perils—perhaps even with that of the African widow’s son, another boy “about my own age and size,” whose brief appearance early in Equiano’s captivity had so quickly acquired the disconcerting characteristics of a “delusion.” Surely there is an uncommon affinity linking all such half-lit figures from a near-legendary past with the picture that Equiano offers of two African boys, caught up in a respite of happiness on the Isle of Wight. That crucial episode too is fraught with background, as evanescent and as haunting as the suggestive lines marking the face of Yorick’s young companion in a Calais coach yard. Equiano (like Sterne) elects to evoke these subterranean stories but to leave them unexplained—to stress the dramatic psychological and spiritual gaps that finally unite his historical with his religious experience.

Interest of the kind that the *Interesting Narrative* strives to evoke is an imaginative ligature, a tie that resists the solicitation of formal devices or overt appeals, much as grace resists the contractual tactics with which Equiano at first hopes to secure it. Such ties resist, with nearly equal success, the “interested” application of ethical or religious fervor, like that which Equiano frequently deploys on behalf of slavery’s victims, the “strong” analogies that he draws between Eboan and Jewish customs, his stirring references to Miltonic hymns of resistance, or the instances of providential intercession with which he marks the gradual progression of his religious feeling. This dimension of human intimacy attaches itself, instead, to those moments when Equiano’s story loses its simplicity, avoiding sentimental or pious formulas—sometimes at the expense of the reader’s favorable assessment of the narrator’s character—and substituting for such superficial approval the imperfect perception of unplumbed depths that Auerbach associates with “the historical.”

Part of this effect springs from Equiano's methods of conveying the sheer fertility of his experience. A single, extensive paragraph early in the book, for example, opens straightforwardly enough with an instance of mistaken identity at sea. The *Roebuck*, an English warship on which Equiano and his master are currently serving, meets an unidentified vessel off the coast of France that does not respond to repeated hails. Just as the *Roebuck* opens fire, the stranger abruptly hoists English colors, narrowly averting "mischief" (71). Three full pages later, in Vincent Carretta's recent edition of Equiano's book, the same paragraph closes with the narrator admiring the scalp and "ornaments" of "an Indian king," grisly trophies taken by a Highlander at the siege of Louisbourg.

Between these points, Equiano transfers from one vessel to another four times, catching several glimpses in the process of Admiral John Byng, during his 1757 trial for cowardice and dereliction of duty. He nearly loses a leg to chilblains in a London hospital; survives smallpox; notes a "judgment of God" on a wicked young sailor, who damns his eyes only to lose one; narrowly averts being shipped to Turkey, on board the *Preston*, so as to study the French horn en route; briefly wonders at "the shops and stalls of every kind of goods" that he finds on board the *Royal George*; admires the peak of Teneriffe; gains the favorable intercession of "the good and gallant General Wolfe," when Equiano is caught "fighting with a young gentleman" at sea; and witnesses the gruesome wound of an English lieutenant, whose cheek is pierced by a musket ball as he is in the act of opening his mouth to give "the word of command" during the landing at Louisbourg (73).

The cascade of circumstances is intoxicating. The mixture of gallantry and barbarity—of English enterprise and English incompetence—mingle with tantalizing manifestations of Equiano's own character that register a fleeting impression: his successful resistance when the doctors at St. George's Hospital want to amputate his infected leg; the musical aptitude that tempts his master to train him on the French horn; his willingness, for some unknown reason, to fight a young (presumably white) "gentleman" on board the British flagship during the Louisbourg campaign. Like the suggestive encounter on the Isle of Wight in the following chapter, these glimpses of private passions and personal gifts seem overwhelmed by the public panorama that surrounds them, at the same time that the panorama itself becomes a static background for the growth of individual consciousness to which the traditions of a conversion narrative steadily, and almost invisibly, appeal. This strange inversion of foreground and background takes comic form at the beginning of the elaborate epigraphic summary that precedes Chapter IV: "The Author is baptized—Narrowly escapes drowning." How such a ludicrous juxtaposition escaped Equiano's scrutiny

through nine editions of his book is itself inexplicable, unless it too is intended to invite the reader's attention to forces that erupt from below.

Some of the disappointment that Mary Wollstonecraft and Richard Gough express in the so-called "Methodist" portions of Equiano's story may spring from the process of narrative attenuation, or shallowing, that begins just at the point where the narrator undertakes to plumb the depths of his soul. Such a result may simply be a generic liability of conversion narratives. The "uncommon commotions" within to which Equiano strives to give voice, in a long, conventional poem, remain as inaccessible to expressive language as grace itself is inaccessible to the purely external tactics of a good "churchman." Despite some moments of eloquence, Equiano's confessional lines shed no light on the bewildering metamorphosis from grief to guilt that they describe. How the victim of English slavers is brought to perceive himself almost exclusively as a sinner remains entirely unexplained.<sup>24</sup>

This especially startling collision of incommensurable experiences may itself be purposeful: an extreme instance of the capacity of Equiano's story to lose its simplicity. When in addition to his familiarity with the three parts of the French horn, with the mathematical Rule of Three, with the principles of barter, with refining wines, and with hair dressing, Equiano adds the skill of alligation, he touches directly on the problem of finding grounds for integrating apparently incommensurable things (165–66). Ephraim Chambers relates alligation to the commercial necessity of blending precious metals into a single system of value that would permit merchants accustomed to drastically different currencies to make fair exchanges of goods. When one blended vintages of wine, the value of the resulting amalgamation would be arrived at by alligation. Any mixture of several "simples" into a more complex whole required this method of proportional analysis. The term, Chambers adds, comes directly from the Latin *alligare*, to tie together. In antiquity, Chambers observes, the *alligati* were the "basest" category of slaves that the Roman marketplace recognized—those least reconciled to their circumstances and who were, accordingly, always kept in fetters.<sup>25</sup>

Olaudah Equiano is not among these desperate victims of an acute hunger for liberty. To the dismay of many of his readers, he finds himself able to trade in "human cargo," as a commercial agent for his West Indian and

24. Helen Thomas' claim that Equiano is largely successful in synthesizing (or "creolizing") his African and his English religious identities strikes me as unpersuasive in the face of the difficulty that this confessional poem represents. See *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* 226–54.

25. See the entry on "alligation" in Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia: Or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 4 vols. (London, 1786).

English employers, even after his religious conversion; to fuse the values of economic self-interest and abolitionism; to inhabit, without apparent discomfort, a profoundly impure world. In many aspects of his experience, he is in fact what the impetuous Phaeacian prince accuses Ulysses of being: a mean sea-farer in pursuit of gain. Some deeply sublimated form of mental or spiritual alligation would seem indispensable to accommodating these unstable ethical mixtures. But alligation, like "interest," is a suggestive metaphor for the process by which readers find themselves tied to another's experience, fettered by consciousness and by conscience to the contradictory and ambiguous realm of the historical. In grasping the basis of this appeal, Equiano insured that his story would retain a measure of artistic life far in excess of its documentary importance to a contemporary cause.

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