

sublime of *The Fall* and, of course, the other odes. Hers is not the only reading to do so, but none could catalog the disagreeables more relentlessly. Patterson begins with the “counterhypothesis” that “the poem *undermines* the traditional ideology of Autumn” (p. 453; Patterson’s italics). The first stanza, then, seems to restrict fruitfulness merely to the planning stage: the second lets Autumn’s “seeming generosity drift away into irresponsibility.” Even the bees have been deluded into false optimism and bad management. “Ripeness” itself becomes suspect—a self-indulgent “perversion of georgic toil” not unlike Isabella’s way of growing basil. “Stubble-plains” and “last oozings” are not a compelling invitation to maturity. In short, “Nature is amoral and not to be depended upon” (p. 453), a careless provider who overcharges for an inferior product. Patterson concludes that, although her version of “To Autumn” is less “consoling” than Freeman’s or Hartman’s, it “releases back into the poem more of the dialectical energy we hope for when we read” (p. 457). This energy, Patterson might have added, leads to further consolation—that is, the mind’s affirmation of its own power over tragic circumstance—for, in Keats’s words, intensity excites a “depth of speculation . . . in which to bury . . . repulsiveness.” The mind, with all its powers brought into play, simultaneously creates, tests, and accepts a version of reality firm enough to qualify as beauty. Or, as Hazlitt says in defining the “pleasure . . . derived from tragic poetry”: “We do not wish the thing to be so; but we wish it to appear such as it is. For knowledge is conscious power. . . .”

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The Documentary Mode in Black Literature

To the Editor:

Barbara Foley’s essay “History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature” (*PMLA*, 95 [1980], 389–403) reminds us that documentation has been wedded to fiction making for several hundred years, despite contemporary claims to innovation. Foley knowledgeably locates many black writers in the tradition and shows how black literature has been “insistently grounded” in history. The essay is an important step toward desegregating critical perspectives.

Yet Foley’s orientation toward classification raises several problems. First, in her urgency to establish black literature as a valid source for general critical perceptions about mimesis, she reduces

the uses of documentation to two categories, for typicality or for skepticism. She then loads these categories with a wide variety of names, as if to dignify black writers by associating them with Twain, Tolstoy, George Eliot, Mailer, Defoe, and so on. In fact, the essay’s profusion of references seems involuntarily to illustrate one of its most interesting themes, that certain kinds of documentation are meant to appease a hostile audience.

That aim may well be a historical necessity, either for blacks writing novels or for scholars writing about black literature for *PMLA*. What disturbs me is the essay’s tendency to turn a historical necessity into an imaginative virtue. To say, as Foley does, that “many writers have converted this negative requirement into a positive asset” (p. 392) may slight the issue of constrained expression. I think she should take Darwin Turner’s point about the hostile audience more seriously.

For instance, Foley cogently shows how documentation in slave narratives presupposes a disbelieving audience. In “Benito Cereno” Melville devilishly plays with that need of whites for documentation; he frames an ostensibly objective legal summary with the unquestioned legitimacy of white civil and religious authorities uniting to preclude black perspectives and protect their own. As Nina Baym describes in “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction” (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 909–23), Melville assumed the freedom to “quarrel” with his audience’s assumptions, however covertly. But a Frederick Douglass had no such freedom, if he wished to be published. The necessity to prove one’s typicality, and the more subtle requirement of forcing complex feelings into the straitjacket of shared Christian uplift, led to writings that tended to reduce diverse individual voices to a dignified pattern of aspiration on the white man’s model, much as Foley says *Roots* tries to “assure” readers of “the vitality of the nation’s democratic ideals” (p. 401).

Frederick Douglass’ narration of his fight with the slave breaker Covey illustrates how an important black writer had to be more attuned to his audience than to personal complexity. He presents himself as righteously affronted but never out of control, never un-Christian. By repeatedly describing Covey as a “snake,” Douglass looks like an angel to his audience, and throughout his account Douglass is acutely aware of positioning his voice to avoid offending expected norms of faith and authority. He also takes care to emphasize comic rather than threatening aspects of the fight. He conveys a relaxed acceptance of Christian discourse even while noting his fall from Christian submissiveness, for instance in joking that “I soon had occasion to make my fallen state known to my Sunday-pious

brother, Covey." At the fight's fever pitch, he recalls a "musty proverb" for his audience, and he carefully if unrealistically discriminates between his "defensive" attitude toward Covey and his "aggressive" attitude toward Covey's cousin, who wasn't in authority. Ending with a rousing citation from Byron, the chapter presents a voice at ease with the white American values of Christianity, upward mobility, elegant expression, and self-reliance. Only within that frame does Douglass define freedom and manhood. His rebellion, he implies, has happily made a self worthy of his audience.

Everyone who reads the slave narratives or much subsequent black writing senses, although in a less explicit way, that unacceptable attitudes and feelings have been at least partially constrained by a falsely literary language derived from white models. While the best white American writers of the time were ambivalently or overtly attacking their readers, black writers had to document their whiteness, as well as their history, before they could be allowed the first steps toward literary freedom.

Foley is well aware of these constraints. Yet her classifications lead her not only to underestimate questions of audience but also to argue against mixed modes. Styron's *Nat Turner* and Haley's *Roots* are indeed specious works. But they do not fail simply because they have mixed up the two functions of documentation. That purist argument would condemn most classic American masterpieces, which, as she says, deliberately mix representational and symbolic modes. My point is that white writers could assume a freedom to play with genres, while black writers could not. Rather than demand pure typicality or pure apocalypse from black writers, as Foley seems to do, why not look more closely at the narrative consequences of not being able to quarrel creatively with one's audience?

Perhaps the absence of Toni Morrison speaks to the limitations of the problem being addressed. Morrison's *Sula* will endure long after Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*—and Doctorow and Capote, for that matter—is forgotten; Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* will endure too, and not for documentary reasons. To make such discriminations involves questions of artistic soul as well as of anatomy. In the long run we look to literature not for historical typicality or political persuasion but for imaginative life. If, as Barbara Foley's essay implies, we have barely begun to ask such life of black literature, our neglect is a damning indictment of American readers.

DAVID LEVERENZ

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Ms. Foley replies:

David Leverenz' letter raises several questions that are important to criticism in general and to the criticism of black literature in particular. His remarks have caused me to reexamine closely my essay on the documentary mode in black literature. While I grant the legitimacy of some of Leverenz' points and welcome his critique, most of the assumptions that guide his remarks seem to me misplaced.

Leverenz first suggests that I intend to "dignify black writers by associating them with Twain, Tolstoy, George Eliot, Mailer, Defoe, and so on." My purpose is not to legitimate black writers by endowing them with the mantle of whiteness but to demonstrate the continuity between the strategies by which, say, a George Eliot and a Richard Wright have confronted similar problems of craft and expression. In literary criticism and social relations, desegregation means not that peoples of color gain stature through association with whites but simply that artificial barriers erected by racism are removed, to the benefit of both majority and minority cultures. If Ernest Gaines benefits from a comparison with Defoe, certainly Defoe is equally illuminated by the juxtaposition.

Leverenz' principal argument is that, since my classifications are primarily formal, they lead me to overlook the extent to which black writers have been constrained by the expectations of a white audience possessing cultural hegemony. Certainly it would be naive to ignore the psychological and artistic effects of this hegemony, especially on black writers of the nineteenth century: if we compare the rhetorical freedom of *The Fire Next Time* or *Mumbo-Jumbo* with the evident restraint of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* or *The Marrow of Tradition*, we must acknowledge the greater artistic compass that becomes available to black writers once certain apprehensions about audience reception have been overcome. I made this point peripherally in my essay, and Leverenz is quite right to insist on a greater emphasis. But his example of Melville and Douglass is in some ways poorly chosen, since Melville employs the pseudodocumentary form to meet fictive ends, whereas Douglass works with the rhetorical resources of autobiography to fulfill a historical purpose. While, as Leverenz ably demonstrates, Douglass does project an untroubled acceptance of "white" Christian values, his description of his encounter with Covey is, I think, effective precisely because he leaves his audience no recourse other than to reject Covey and identify themselves with the historical Frederick Douglass, a slave. The claim that Douglass allowed