

## Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

### "To Autumn"

To the Editor:

In "How to load . . . and bend": Syntax and Interpretation in Keats's *To Autumn*" (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 449–58), Annabel M. Patterson argues that a syntactical analysis like Donald Freeman's ("Keats's 'To Autumn': Poetry as Process and Pattern," *Language and Style*, 11 [1978], 3–17), far from assuring a new objectivity, is as dependent on preunderstanding as Geoffrey Hartman's equally genial reading ("Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats's 'To Autumn,'" *Literary Theory and Structure*, ed. F. Brady et al. [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973], pp. 305–30) and her own grimmer treatment. My comment is only on Hartman's and Patterson's readings as readings, and not on the question of preunderstanding.

Hartman assigns "To Autumn" a "new sublimity" that "domesticates with the heart." In the "traditional type of sublime poem"—and, indeed, in Keats's other odes—the structure is "epiphanic . . . : it evokes the presence of a god, or vacillates sharply between imagined presence and absence." But "To Autumn" has "no epiphany," nor "any absence/presence dialectic" (pp. 307–10). The second stanza, to be sure, personifies Autumn, but the first stanza has already diffused this deity into her "attributes" (p. 323). Clearly, Autumn is a goddess with her hair down, enjoying a day's companionship. She will not hear of death: "what comes next is not winter but night," not "dirge" but "lullaby" (p. 310). "Nothing remains of the cultic distance between votary and personified power," as the poet's mind drifts off into "richness" (pp. 323–24). It is all very comfortable, with the mind scarcely aware of the "widening speculation" that has become "'treble soft' surmise" (p. 315). But doubt intrudes, I think, whether the loss of "epiphanic consciousness" precludes epiphany or testifies to the amiable power that lulls the poet (or reader) into "presence."

Either way, in Hartman's reading, the poem opens up a distance between "surmise" and the human exigencies of both pain and pleasure. Hazlitt remarks on a similar distance when he distin-

guishes between the "ideal" and the "dramatic." The "ideal" aspires "after pure enjoyment and lofty contemplation alone"; the mind "rejects as much as possible not only the petty, the mean, and disagreeable, but also the agony and violence of passion, the force of contrast, and the extravagance of imagination." The "dramatic," by contrast, may include all these and must include the last three. Keats's letters record his decision in favor of the dramatic—or, more specifically, the tragic. The "ideal" risks an embarrassment that Keats made up his mind to avoid. Stuart A. Ende's *Keats and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976) looks at this risk. For Ende, the sublime is a response to ideal "otherness" remote from the pains and pleasures of ordinary life. As Ende (citing Yeats) recognizes, otherness is aesthetically perverse. Otherness rouses the imagination, but pursued too far, it thins out reality. "All grows unsubstantial and fantastic," wrote Yeats. Keats's ultimate solution to this dilemma, Ende believes, is the "sublime pathetic," which without forsaking otherness retains a "commitment to sorrow" (pp. 90–100). In Ende's reading of "To Autumn" inspiration comes to look more like conspiracy, but if epiphanic distance is "muted" in togetherness, Autumn's augury of death nudges the poet back into a tragic world (p. 143).

Ende credits Keats's phrase "sublime pathetic," written in the margin of *Paradise Lost*, to Hazlitt, who describes the fallen angels as "mingling pathos and sublimity." Since Ende puts sadness at odds with otherness, he calls "sublime pathetic" an oxymoron; but for Hazlitt and Keats what checks sublimity is not the kind of emotion but a lack of ardor. If Keats's sublime is remote, it is remote only from less passionate experience. In *The Fall of Hyperion* the otherness that at last quickens the dreamer's imagination to "see as a god sees" is not Hyperion's godhood but his angry defiance of "aching horrors," whereas Saturn's passive dejection had left the dreamer wanting only to die. For sublime inspiration, epiphanic presence in Keats's later poems points back to tragic emotions, which, as Keats wrote, are intense enough "in their sublime" to evaporate "all disagreeables."

Patterson keeps "To Autumn" within the tragic

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