

however provisionally, a critical position that I have worked to develop in scattered publications and that I hope to elaborate more fully in the future.

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### Documentary Narrative

To the Editor:

In his essay "Latin American Documentary Narrative" (99 [1984]: 41–55), David William Foster brings into cogent relief several of the narrative and stylistic techniques by which writers of "documentary narrative" would impute to their work an expressly "documentary" function. But without extending his critique to encompass also the evidentiary claims of "documentary narrative," Foster neglects, I believe, the essentially rhetorical nature of such claims and thus fails to distinguish between these works' "rhetoric of fact" and their putative function as *works* of fact. By ignoring this distinction and thus seeming to accept the positivistic premises of so much "documentary literature," the critic Foster risks falling prey to the very rhetorical strategies he has just so nicely delineated.

There may indeed be a "continuity between documentary history and narrative fiction," as Foster argues. But rather than underscoring this continuity, as he does, the critic might be better served by qualifying it, calling into question the possibility of a literature that actually documents anything beyond a writer's structural apprehension of events, and then evaluating the ways that "documentary narrative" reinforces the illusion of fact even as it reconstructs and interprets these facts. Whether we read biblical "testament," faked or authentic journal entries, tracts of the social realists, or Latin American "documentary narratives," none of these texts really emerges, as Foster believes they do, as "an especially productive form of documentary" so much as they generate through different means their own persuasive "rhetoric of fact."

At one point, Foster notes that Rodolfo Walsh "blends true materials gathered in his investigations and narrative strategies to make a rhetorically effective presentation of an actual event" (42). But by "rhetorically effective," we must ask whether he means that this work is thus convincing in its seeming authenticity, persuasive of its verisimilitude, creditable as fact, or all three. The point is, however, that without distinguishing these works' effectiveness in presenting themselves as fact from their reflexive interpretation of fact, the uncritical reader risks confusing a work in the documentary mode for the document it rhetorically purports to be. And in light of so much ideological abuse of this mode, it should be just those works that are most per-

suasive of their documentary nature that draw our keenest critical attention; for in achieving such "rhetorical effectiveness," these works have also most effectively whitened from view the shaping hand of their authors' governing mythoi.

Even though these narratives would aspire—and then claim—to document a set of events, all they can actually document is their own coming into being, their own reconstruction of events. In emphasizing the process by which events are remade in the image of any given ideological, narrative, or even religious frame, the critical reader shifts the burden of "documentary literature" from its avowed—though rhetorical—function as "testimony" to its undeclared but more practicable aim of interpretation. Instead of separating the normative nature of events from the manner in which writers apprehend them, we recognize that the frames of reference through which writers perceive, narrate, and then understand events are very much part of the normative nature of these events.

Thus, I do not doubt that, as Foster writes, "Walsh's narrative . . . demands to be read as a sociohistorical document in which the techniques of fiction enhance the texture of truth" (43). But for the critical reader to acquiesce unconditionally in the face of this demand and to accept the "texture of truth" for truth itself would be to ignore the schemata of mind and narrative that inform all reconstructions of reality—even those so enhanced and textured. In addition to recognizing the ways that fictional techniques enhance the "texture of truth," as Foster does so ably, the critic must also bring to light the manner in which this texture of truth masks the structures of mind and narrative that have given "truth" a voice in the first place.

When Foster maintains that a textual strategy in which a witness' declarations are incorporated is "paradigmatically documentary and antithetical to fictional narrative" (46), he seems to neglect the possibility that, as a rhetorical strategy, this technique is *not* anti-fictional; it is another aspect of the fictional mode. Just as the fixing of a chronology, a first-person narrative voice, a diary format, place-names and dates, witness declarations, and even intertextualized newspaper accounts and photographs all reinforce the rhetorical facticity in a documentary narrative, all ultimately remain rhetorical in process, not evidentiary of specific realities. In fact, by stressing the accuracy of these accounts over their more valuable interpretive properties, the critic leaves the "documentary narrative" vulnerable to undeserved—and ultimately irrelevant—criticism regarding so-called historical points of fact in the event of conflicting "testimonies."

Even though Foster does indeed give special prominence to the issue of narrativity in "documentary narrative," he stops short of calling into question the celebrated documentary claims of this literature. He notes the many ways that novelists employ rhetorical

means to reinforce the supposed documentary value of their works; but then, by failing to extend his critique to the documentary claims themselves, Foster misses an opportunity to highlight the difference between the rhetorical voice of this literature and its actual—and most valuable—function as social commentary.

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*Reply:*

If I understand Young's comments correctly, he faults me for (1) not questioning or investigating the accuracy of the claims to fact by documentary narrative and (2) accepting uncritically the "whitening from view of the shaping hand of their authors' governing mythoi." I would agree that the first assertion is true: I personally have no way of undertaking such an investigation, nor do I believe literary critics must necessarily do so (although they may find it useful to). But I don't believe this is really what Young is suggesting that I should have done. Rather, one ought to call into question the ability of documentary writing to be factual (whatever exactly this term means). I thought I had made it clear that I accept the Hayden White hypothesis that historical writing is rhetorical textualizing. But it is a delicate point whether or not a non-third world critic should trumpet the postulate that all writing pretending to be a valid representation of the facts is indistinguishable from fictive discourse, particularly when the writings at issue deal with personal testimonials of suffering in countries where it is more likely that official discourse is the most creatively fictive.

I find it more difficult to accept the second reservation, since I sought to make as my point that the best of the documentary writing considered—the texts of Walsh and Valdés—is inscribed essentially in terms of the individual writer, identified by his own name (and, in Walsh's case, sought out because of his reputation as a writer), who is engaged in the act of interpretation. Of "literary" interest is nothing less than the fact that explicit rhetorical ploys—narrative strategies one readily associates with fiction—are employed toward this end. I did, however, express some reservation about how Barnett refrains from making clear how much he mediates between his text and his interviewee's speech.

Finally, can one doubt that cultural texts are always read in terms of their social texts? In Argentina, if a novelist had written a fictional text about a seven-year "dirty war" that systematically exterminated tens of thousands of citizens in the midst of one of Latin America's most prosperous and culturally sophisticated societies, the text would have been called gross fantasy or allegory (cf. William Burroughs' *The Wild Boys*). Yet, now that democracy has been restored in Argentina and some of the "facts" may now come to light,

the novelist Ernesto Sabato will sign the final report of the government's Commission on the Disappeared Ones, which he chairs. The facts that Walsh reported in his documentary text became much more than rhetorically artful representation: Rodolfo Walsh himself is one of the disappeared ones.

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*To the Lighthouse*

To the Editor:

In his essay "Only Relations: Vision and Achievement in *To the Lighthouse*" (99 [1984]: 212–24), Thomas G. Matro argues that the closing events of Woolf's novel do not signify "a transcendent 'oneness' or a perceptual balance captured in art" (abstract, 152) but rather emphasize "the act of making," Lily's "'attempt at something,'" which is "more important than the 'unity' the painting would achieve" (222). According to Matro, the novel, which everywhere exhibits "unresolved ambivalence" (152), "co-opts every one of the aesthetic and philosophic paradigms that . . . have in fact informed most of the novel's criticism to date, and it does so by dramatizing their enactment within the novel and showing their liabilities and limitations" (222–23).

Matro's rejection of a "transcendent 'oneness'" is well taken; but the fundamental problem of the artist (of Lily, of Woolf) remains stubbornly the achieving of some kind of unity, and Woolf's elaborate symbolic patterns force the reader to see a paradigm that is not co-opted, I submit, by the image of "unresolved ambivalence." The unity that Woolf symbolizes is not "transcendent"; it is a realized unity created by Lily, who imitates the esemplastic creation of Mrs. Ramsay. The lighthouse is a symbol of this unity; it is not just, as Matro claims, "a point around which or through which feelings are organized" (222).

I share some of Matro's uneasiness about existing interpretations of the symbolism; but the problem is not the critics' determination to define Woolf's symbolism, rather it is the tendency to frame definitions with insufficient care, without taking into account the full pattern of oppositions throughout the novel. To understand the unity that Lily sees and that is symbolized in the lighthouse, one must trace Woolf's symbolism to its root in the old distinction between appearance and reality, or between secondary and primary qualities as defined by Locke (whom Mr. Ramsay studies, along with Hume and Berkeley).

The Lockean distinction is made early in *To the Lighthouse*, when Lily, scrutinizing her painting, thinks: "Then beneath the *colour* there was the *shape*" (Har-