

Conflicted Literacy: Frederick Douglass's Critical Model

Wendy Ryden

ABSTRACT: Literacy narratives have been pedagogically important in writing instruction, particularly in the basic writing class, as a means for students to interrogate the politics of language and education and thus to establish a critical connection to writing. But the literacy narrative as a critical genre is problematic. Such narratives often are absorbed by and promote the "literacy myth," a culturally conservative belief in the unqualified developmental power of literacy. Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative is often a major textual site of perpetuating such ideology. Minority and working class students especially are asked to understand the importance of reading and writing to their own intellectual and cultural development by absorbing the "lesson" of Douglass's fight to acquire literacy. But a close reading of his text reveals a more complicated, radical notion of literacy acquisition than is often credited to Douglass. This essay explores the rhetoric of literacy narratives and the critical model that Douglass offers.

... I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out.

—Frederick Douglass (42)

I feel education is important. Everyone should do good and also try their best. Nobody should not take advantage of education. Some people want to go to school, but they can't. Education is important for our future.

—A high school student after reading *Narrative of the Life of Douglass* (quoted in Adisa 42)

The literacy narrative, as a college writing assignment, especially in basic writing and ESL classes, can help students interrogate the public placement of their private selves through a critical examination of literacy and educational practices. According to Wendy Bishop, composing such narratives can provide "a place where you can look at and critique your schooling and challenge your education" (67). Students may not only arrive at a more critical understanding of these practices through a reading of

Wendy Ryden is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum at Long Island University—C.W. Post.

Conflicted Literacy

their own literacy acquisition, but they may also come to see their literate selves as socially inflected and thus determined by or resistant to prevailing standards of literacy and education. Advocates of the literacy narrative, such as Mary Soliday, for example, attribute critical pedagogical properties to the first-person narrative investigation of language and literacy, as students create representations of their experience for analysis and location in a greater cultural narrative. Pursuing this line of narrative inquiry can lead students to a critical appreciation of the political and social role of language in general. At its best, the literacy narrative assignment can accomplish what Mary Jane Dickerson holds out as possible for student autobiography in general:

when students develop a voice they can identify as their own through its embodiment in a piece of writing that recreates their world and those voices that inhabit that world, they are well on their way toward the empowerment that enables them to meet the constant challenges of reading and writing their own histories and those written by others. (140)

But literacy narratives produced by students can certainly fall short of this ascribed potential. As Smit points out, the literacy autobiography is chiefly a school genre, insufficiently modeled outside the classroom in professional works except as portions of larger developmental narratives. Instead of critiquing the structures in which literacy acquisition is embedded, students, in an effort to decipher this genre, graft their stories onto an existing cultural narrative with which they *are* familiar: what Eldred and Mortensen call “the literacy myth” and the “romanticized power of education” where “a flower girl can become a duchess through education” (515). Defining the literacy myth as “the easy and unfounded assumption that better literacy . . . leads to economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement” (512), they observe that the cultural “promises of literacy are so great and so compelling that it seems impossible to argue against it” and that “Like many other professions, ours (English studies) is inspired by a certain kind of disciplinary romance” (515). Daniel J. Royer, building on the work of Harvey Graff and especially Deborah Brandt’s emphasis on literacy as a communal, intersubjective activity, adds that “the myth includes not only the mistaken assumption that literacy begets economic freedom, but also the fallacy that literate persons think better than do non-literate persons” and that literacy is largely a matter of individual development. Through the literacy myth, we place faith in the abstraction that language, like knowledge,

Wendy Ryden

is empowering without asking how, for whom, and at whose expense this empowerment occurs.

Students, in an attempt to read their teacherly audience, may produce narratives that reaffirm this belief in humanistic development through writing and reading. Wendy Bishop's volume *The Subject Is Reading* provides examples of literacy narratives that illustrate how college students often interpret the genre. For example, one student concludes her story about her educational development with:

Since I have started reading more, I have found that reading makes me a more intelligent person and has helped improve my writing skills. I feel that reading, depending on what type of reading it is, makes me think and be more creative with my mind. . . . I have now learned that reading is not something to be afraid of because I can be taken into a whole different world with reading. (25)

Another student, who is diagnosed dyslexic, observes that "Looking back on the days I had to learn to read, I realized that I learned a lot more than just reading. I learned to struggle and survive" (35). Even a student who has irreverently written of his hatred for reading writes of his redemption:

Now I've come to realize that reading, as well as studying the text, is the only thing that can help me succeed on the tests. This is not to say that my avoidance of reading did nothing for me. On the contrary, I believe it has helped me to achieve the level of reading that I now enjoy. I just realize that now it is time for a completely different approach: doing it right the first time. (13)

Among the texts that may serve as models for literacy and educational narratives in the classroom is the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, a favorite reading selection of multiculturalists and compositionists who wish to draw students' attention to the importance of literacy in intellectual development.¹ Indeed many teachers credit Douglass's 1845 text with enormous pedagogical and self-actualizing potential, seeing it as a means to bring out for their students "the best of who we are and what we can become" (Brown x). The *Narrative* is undoubtedly an extraordinary text and students certainly benefit by being acquainted with Douglass's work, yet I believe that Douglass's critical presentation of literacy acquisition is often obscured and absorbed by the larger prevailing cultural narrative of the

Conflicted Literacy

literacy myth as identified by Eldred and Mortensen and others. Specifically, I question the representation by teachers and students alike of Douglass's account of his attainment of literacy. Simplifications and misreadings of these crucial passages, I maintain, attest to the pervasiveness of the literacy myth and its coloring of our interpretive lenses with regard to this text. Looking at the way instructors teach and students respond to Douglass can provide insight into the way students experience requests to write about their own literacy and education.

While in general as scholars and teachers we must always contend with the gap between what our scholarship unearths and what we are able to help students understand in the classroom, the teaching of Douglass seems in particular to exemplify this pedagogical problem as instructors work towards problematizing the rhetorical construction of Douglass's autobiographies. In the MLA volume on *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, James C. Hall tells us in his introduction that he is "interested in getting students to experience the narrative as a language act grounded within a complex cultural history and subject to a particular set of material and interpersonal relations" (15). Indeed much of the critical work on Douglass has focused on just how linguistically complex and contradictory his autobiographical acts are. For example, building on the seminal criticism of Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, who identified the paradoxical attempts of Douglass to author himself through appropriation of the Master's language, Goddu and Smith sum up Douglass's dilemma: "The linguistic and expressive situation of Douglass's self-writings produces a peculiar form of bondage and freedom. As in any scene of writing, language can betray" (840) for "by seizing the white word, does Douglass become inscribed in it?" Douglass's work is a testament to "the difficulty of retaining his autonomy in a world ordered by an alien word" (823), where he attempts to comply with the dialectical and sometimes conflicting rhetorical purposes of creating the literate self and representing that self to an abolitionist audience through the genre of the slave narrative. In his autobiographical endeavors, "Douglass is placed as speaking subject and replaced, displaced as speaking subject and placed again" (Wardrop 657). Lisa Sisco describes Douglass's "definitions of literacy" as "shifting" as he demonstrates an "understanding of literacy as a system of self-representation . . . and as an avenue for political representation as he attempts to *speak and write* for an oppressed people without alienating his white readership" (213). Other critics, such as Leverenz, Bergner, and Wallace have further identified the overdetermined nature of Douglass's self-representation in relation to language by excavating the connection

Wendy Ryden

between identity formation and gender in the construction of masculinity under the slavocracy.

The critical studies underscoring the complexities that propel the *Narrative* are myriad, yet teachers find that students tend to read the work transparently. Lindon Barrett, in his discussion of Douglass, describes the difficulty of teaching the slave narrative: “Expecting to hit experiential bedrock, students overlook the acts of textual representation with which they are confronted” (31). Indeed many of the essayists in the *MLA Approaches to Teaching the Narrative* emphasize teaching Douglass’s rhetorical complexity (such as Keith D. Miller’s and Ruth Ellen Kocher’s urging that “in approaching the *Narrative*, teachers and students must consider its resplendent place within Douglass’s larger rhetorical tapestry and its interargumentative relation to the rest of that tapestry” [81-82]) even as they acknowledge the difficulty of doing so. “One problem the teacher of Douglass’s *Narrative* faces,” writes John Ernest “is that many students are all too ready to believe that they can understand both the book and its world” (110) and that there is a temptation on the part of teachers to “present Douglass’s *Narrative* as a book that speaks for itself” (111). Although not a contributor to the *MLA* volume, Mark Higbee echoes the above observations in his “Frederick Douglass and Today’s College Classroom” when he writes that “Most of my students have real difficulty recognizing that the *Narrative* . . . is constructed to tell a story that serves specific purposes” (47) and that the “accessible and passionate prose can induce readers to overlook the book’s full complexity” (46).

Higbee and the contributors to the *MLA’s Approaches* (Hall) are largely concerned with the pedagogical issues that arise when teaching the *Narrative* as a literary text. Barrett, for example, sees the teaching of the slave narrative as an opportunity for readers to “consider race on some level as a discursively mediated phenomenon and apparatus. Students must be led to understand that a central lesson to be gleaned . . . is the way in which race ‘organizes a range of discursive practices’ [Chay 639]” (31). But as critics have argued that race and gender are important constructs to understand in Douglass’s work, so have they argued for a similar treatment of his relationship to literacy. It follows, then, that when emphasized as a literacy narrative, we should have similar expectations of theoretical richness.

To provide a glimpse into how Douglass translates as a literacy and educational narrative in our students’ understanding, I turn to *The Teachers and Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. This volume, edited by Wesley Brown, contains descriptions of a range of classrooms in which the *Narrative* is the featured text. Brown tells us in the preface that “Our thinking [in assembling

Conflicted Literacy

the collection] was that Douglass's story of 'how a slave was made a man' and the importance of literacy to gaining his freedom might prompt visually oriented young people to look upon the written word as more worthy of their attention" (ix). Elsewhere in the volume Meredith Sue Willis reports that, in a classroom situation, Brown wanted to have a discussion with a group of students of the importance of reading and writing in the life

of someone to whom it was prohibited—the great value of writing and reading, and how Douglass did it under enormous pressure and at risk of life and limb." He [Brown] wanted to jar the students a little, to have them look at literacy not as a chore, but as something precious, a gift. (92)

Brown evidently sees in the text an occasion for didacticism that is no doubt appealing to many educators and part of their motive for bringing Douglass into the writing class: students who take literacy for granted will read about a man who had to fight for it and, as a result, will be roused from their complacency regarding the written word and its power to uplift. Figured in this way, Douglass's literacy narrative becomes a morality tale, a way of shaming lackadaisical pupils, especially African American and other minority students, into an appreciation for what they have, and at the same time reaffirming our cultural literacy myth.

Many of the essays in Brown's collection stress the importance of reading and writing to personal development, both moral and intellectual. As Alfred E. Prettyman states in his chapter called "Frederick Douglass: A Developing Self," "The ability to write was essential to his [Douglass's] self-development, essential to his true freedom" (83). There is no question that in this text Douglass does indeed configure literacy as essential to his idea of freedom, and certainly this construction warrants scrutiny. In fact, I am suggesting that such scrutiny will yield a more complicated view of literacy and freedom than is often gleaned in the classroom, one that challenges in certain respects the dominant literacy myth. By way of contrast to this more complex reading of Douglass, I now take a closer look at some of the chapters in Brown's collection to further elucidate the way teachers deploy Douglass and the way students receive him. By so doing, I hope to show that we are as often as not working with a truncated understanding of Douglass that is both a reflection and reinscription of dominant views of literacy where "Too often, readers conceive literacy . . . as an emancipating skill which leverages the slave out of bondage and into freedom" (Royer). These views, as derived

Wendy Ryden

from Douglass and other sources, may impede students' ability to adopt critical stances towards literacy in their own narratives.

In a chapter called "Knowledge Is Power," Lorenzo Thomas describes his successful experiences using the *Narrative* with college students. He tells us that he presents the book to his students as a "gift" that "is precious" in its "ability to whet the appetite for knowledge" (7). In this sentence and in his title, Thomas makes clear that he sees Douglass's text as a celebration of the salubrious effects of literacy and education on the individual. He elaborates:

[C]ollege students marvel that a man sentenced to illiteracy, a man who literally stole his education, can send them to the dictionary on every other page and startle them with the beautiful logic of his phrasing. This last reaction is the reason that I assign the book. Indeed the appetite for knowledge is the subject of this book. . . . the work is a narrative of self-discovery. Compared to that theme, the author's graphic account of "the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery" is secondary. (2)

I don't think Thomas is wrong in seeing Douglass's story as being about self-discovery or as exceeding the generic boundaries of abolitionist propaganda. As indicated above, literary critics have said as much in their discussions of the relationship between Douglass's self-representation and language. Donald Gibson, for example, has made precisely this claim, noting that Douglass's account is indeed in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. Douglass's representation distinguishes itself from other slave narratives, according to Gibson, through its added psychological dimension and, as a result, achieves a breakthrough literary status. Likewise, in his discussion of Douglass's problematic transcendentalism, Terry J. Martin emphasizes the importance of identity formation in the *Narrative* as he sees Douglass coming to the conclusion that "the power of liberation resides essentially within himself alone" (3). Furthermore, the psychoanalytic readings of Bergner and Wallace, for example, implicitly contain Michele Henkel's assessment: "The *Narrative* is as much about identity formation as it is about slavery" (89). While much scholarship has emphasized representation and identity formation, Royer has called into question the tendency of "deep-text" (364) readings of Douglass to pit such formation against social context, as Thomas and others seem to do, and argues instead for "a revised understanding of literacy" in Douglass's narratives that "stresses community and context as essential

Conflicted Literacy

ingredients to becoming literate, not as forces that stand over and against an individual's personal authenticity, identity, and autonomy" (372).

What I particularly question in Thomas's identification of Douglass's psychological portrait is its reduction, in relation to conceptions of literacy and empowerment, to "the appetite for knowledge." In making this leap, Thomas elides the nuances in Douglass's portrayal and confines the narrative to the safety of the literacy myth. Thomas goes on to emphasize this view when he cites William McFeeley's description of the effect the *Columbian Orator* had on Douglass: "If he could say words . . . say them correctly, say them beautifully—Frederick could act; he could matter in the world" (3). Likewise in reference to the remediation of Douglass's "inadequate writing skills," Thomas quotes Benjamin Quarles: "this unschooled person had penned his autobiography. Such an achievement furnished an object lesson; it hinted at the infinite potentialities of man in whatever station of life. . ." (4). These assertions match the assumption of "economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement" (Royer 265) that our literacy myth links to reading and writing, and thus, taken by themselves, such assertions limit the narrative's scope to a romantic homage celebrating the indomitable spirit of the individual against impossible odds.

The tendency in the lessons described in the *Teachers and Writers* volume (Brown) is to present Douglass's experience as universal and emblematic of the human condition in general, an experience that students can identify with by viewing Douglass's hardships metonymically in relation to human suffering and desire. The result is a dilution of Douglass's cultural criticism to favor a decontextualized, developmental narrative.² Using the 1845 *Narrative* didactically in the classroom, rendering it "an object lesson," accomplishes the appropriation of Douglass's story to the effect of bolstering liberal conceptions of literacy as a matter of individual struggle and reward. Douglass thus is a heroic figure with iconic status, an example to be emulated. As Charles Kuner writes in "Using Douglass's *Narrative* as Motivation for Student Writing" (his contribution to the Brown volume), "I show [the students] that they can have better control of their destiny by empowering themselves with better literacy skills" (70), and the *Narrative* "also shows them the link between literacy and personal empowerment, that they, too, can overcome personal obstacles and become the masters of their own fates" (72).

This view of the *Narrative* as "lesson" is underscored in a chapter by Opal Palmer Adisa. Adisa very usefully supplies high school students' written responses to Douglass's words that demonstrate the moralistic way students

Wendy Ryden

receive Douglass as an embodiment of the power of education. Adisa states her purpose for teaching the *Narrative* as follows: “My major objective is to use literature to stir students to write about their own lives so that they might recognize their worth and find more meaningful ways to direct their energies, the way Frederick Douglass did” (35). One student writes the following after reading the *Narrative*:

I think education is very important, and because my ancestors had to sneak to learn to read and write, I feel that as a young black person, it is my duty to learn everything I can and that people want to teach me. . . . But what makes me mad are those people who don't take advantage of what the teacher tries to teach them. I try to learn everything of whatever is being taught. I really believe that is the only way to succeed in life as a black person. Because one thing they were never able to take was our minds. (42)

That Douglass's achievement was enormous is of course not in dispute, and that he should serve as a role model for African-Americans or anyone else in and of itself is by no means objectionable. David L. Dudley in *Approaches* (Hall) declares that Douglass “is my hero. I invite students to make him their hero too” (137). However, here as elsewhere, a price is paid for the iconic status Douglass is granted, that price being principally the reduction (or perhaps expansion) of the *Narrative* itself to the figure of Douglass as representation of the power of literacy. Jeanne Gunner, building on Foucault's insight of the “author function,” defines iconic discourse as operating conservatively “according to certain laws, always in relation to the iconic text and figure” (3). She juxtaposes “iconic discourse” with “critical discourse,” deeming the latter to be transgressive and contrasting it with the former. Douglass's assumption of iconic status results in, I believe, a conservative absorption of the depiction of his relationship to literacy as represented in the *Narrative*. The discourse here surrounding Douglass's iconic figure both gives authority to and is bolstered by the literacy myth as defined earlier. This process occurs at the expense of unearthing the critical view of literacy that I believe Douglass's text exposes.

Certain aspects of the *Narrative* do seem in accordance with the cultural belief that equates literacy with unqualified moral and intellectual evolution. As many of the contributors to *The Teachers and Writers Guide* (Brown) note, Douglass grants a significant role to literacy in helping him conceive of himself as a free man. As a result of learning to read, Douglass asserts:

Conflicted Literacy

The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. . . . I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm. (43)

Such passages lend credence to the grandiose claims of ennoblement and mind expansion made in the name of literacy. And such a view is consistent with David Leverenz's understanding of Douglass's Emersonian "self-refashioning" into the self-made man who espouses "belief in self-reliance and upward mobility" (126) and an "unswerving advocacy of middle-class individualism and hard work" (129). As Terry Martin notes, "Douglass comes almost literally to embody Emerson's trope of self-reliance" (3).

But despite Leverenz's and Martin's readings of Douglass's individualism (indeed, perhaps it is more accurate to speak, as Gwen Bergner does, of Douglass's "*Commandeering* American myths of self-reliance and heroic rebellion to describe his escape from slavery" [243 emphasis added]), I argue that Douglass's relationship to literacy and freedom, as represented in the 1845 text, is far more complex than what can be allowed for in the literacy myth, even if the "emotional power" of Douglass's prose "can induce some students to resist evaluating the *Narrative* critically" (Higbee 50). Preceding the above passage where Douglass equates literacy with the silver trump of freedom, Douglass describes himself, contrarily, as being in a state of existential despair: "that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish" (42). On a psychological level, Douglass's literacy acquisition is an embattled and bittersweet process and a far cry from the liberatory discourse that characterizes popular understandings of knowledge and empowerment. Indeed, at this moment in the story, knowledge disempowers Douglass, as he tells us, "I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!" (43). Lisa Sisco, while arguing that for Douglass "literacy is not a monolithic thing" (197), notes at this point in the narrative that "literacy has only further enslaved him" (199). Ironically, by his own account, it is this sense of disempowerment that ultimately leads him out of slavery. Douglass's torment stems from his burgeoning understanding that reading alone is not enough to deliver him from slavery; reading provides "no ladder" (42). In this

Wendy Ryden

sense, it is the realization of the limitations of literacy that spurs Douglass on to his quest for both psychological and material emancipation. Something else, he understands, must happen if he is to become free.

This lack is further emphasized in the recounting of his reading of the *Columbian Orator*. As previously mentioned, William McFeeley interprets Douglass's reaction to the *Orator* as: "If he could say words . . . say them correctly, say them beautifully—Frederick could act; he could matter in the world" (quoted in Thomas 3). Certainly Douglass does credit his reading here with expanding his understanding of the moral abhorrence of slavery. He states that "The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery. . ." (42). But once again Douglass expresses a contradiction in his attitude towards literacy and its effects. Among the *Orator* passages that Douglass refers to is one that describes a Socratic dialogue between a master and a slave: "The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master" (42). In this scenario, the slave, through the power of having been educated, is able to use words to effect emancipation. Of course, this state of affairs contrasts sharply with Douglass's own story, and he expresses his skepticism here about the "unexpected effect" of this "voluntary emancipation." While John Burt has seen this section as an example of the hope that the wrongness of slavery is subject to persuasion through language (340), Lisa Sisco's reading of the "horrible pit" into which literacy has cast Douglass seems a more apt interpretation: "The experience of reading provides Douglass with the language to argue on an intellectual and moral basis against slavery, but those arguments are useless in freeing him from his own horrible reality" (199). Thus from this perspective, the description of the master/slave dialogue at this juncture in the text speaks a wry commentary on the "power" of knowledge and words to end oppression.

And yet literacy is, without doubt, essential to ending Douglass's mentality of enslavement, for he clearly states, upon hearing Master Auld's prohibition on reading that "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (36). But it is important here, I would argue, to understand this statement as applying to Douglass in his particular circumstances and not to the power of literacy in general. Not everyone who is literate in the text experiences the enlightenment that Douglass does. For example, literacy, paralleling religion, brings no enlightenment to the slave owners. And neither does it to the poor white children whom Douglass

Conflicted Literacy

bribes and tricks into teaching him his letters. Perhaps more importantly, knowledge does not bring these young people power. Douglass sets up an interesting comparison between himself and the children when he describes his encounters with these “urchins.” In so doing, the text again calls into question prevailing assumptions about education and empowerment that are at the heart of our cultural literacy myth. Douglass describes the “bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me the more valuable bread of knowledge” (41). While Douglass deems knowledge more valuable than bread here, I again suggest that we can read this as applying to his particular case rather than a humanistic statement about literacy in general. For clearly according to Douglass’s own description the actual bread is more valuable to the urchins than the knowledge they possess: they have knowledge but no food to eat. Knowledge, which is lawfully theirs, does not improve their condition; does not benefit them in the same way that knowledge, gained illegally, will ultimately benefit Douglass. Through this juxtaposition, Douglass poses the implicit question: What accounts for this difference?

“The answer to the puzzle of how Douglass became so masterfully literate with so little help from traditional, schoolbook pedagogy,” Royer asserts, “lies in observing the power of involvement in the social practices that promote and sustain literacy” (372). In this case, an understanding of such practices requires an examination of the psychological and material conditions under which Douglass tells us he became compelled to discover his literacy. The *Narrative*, I have suggested, as sometimes used in classroom contexts, may induce an implicit shame in students who have taken for granted what Douglass so struggled for. The logic of the literacy myth suggests that if Douglass had to beg, borrow, steal to acquire his education, how much more should students be able to achieve when this gift of literacy has been so readily offered, if only they would take advantage of the given opportunities? Douglass’s inclusion of the poor white children in the *Narrative* acts as a counter to such logic. An aspect of the critical view of literacy that the *Narrative* affords is that education in and of itself will not lead to psychological or material remedy.

This truth is further underscored in the description of the encounter with the slave-breaker Covey, where Douglass for the first time puts up physical resistance to his enslavers. David Leverenz has discussed this passage as important to helping Douglass define a masculine ethos implicitly contradistinctive to an identity of enslavement. But this section of the text is equally part of Douglass’s literacy narrative, as its inclusion shows the

Wendy Ryden

limits of literacy to self-development. Quite in opposition to a literacy myth that values words over violence, Douglass declares the importance of physical resistance to his developing consciousness. Unequivocally, Douglass announces that “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave . . . and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (74). Douglass must add “physical mastery to that of literacy” in “pugilistic resistance” (Bergner 256). The *coup de grace* then in ending his mental enslavement is not literacy but in fact physical violence.

Certainly education helped prime Douglass for this pivotal moment, and he provides us with an answer as to why literacy did matter so much for him when it seemed to have such little effect on the consciousnesses of the poor whites. He makes a point of telling us that seminal to his literacy experience was the understanding that reading and writing were denied to him. Master Auld, upon hearing of Mistress Auld’s transgression, proclaims, “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. . . . Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. . . . It would forever unfit him to be a slave. . . . It would make him discontented and unhappy.” It is at this point that Douglass has his realization about “the pathway from slavery to freedom.” He goes on to explain:

It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with a high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. . . . In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both. (36-37)

Here Douglass emphatically states that the progressive act of literacy instruction offered by the benevolently intended mistress would not have been enough to inspire the dramatic change of consciousness that was necessary for him to acquire freedom. Hence, once again, Douglass provides us with an example where literacy devoid of a critical dimension is insufficient to produce the liberatory effects so often attributed to it.

Instead, the outcome of Douglass’s literacy is intrinsically connected to the conflicted conditions under which it was acquired. Before her corrup-

Conflicted Literacy

tion, Mistress Auld, in a paradigm consistent with the literacy myth, occupies the position of the liberal educator in relation to Douglass, bestowing literacy upon him as a gift in order to foster self-improvement in the unfortunate slave. But for Douglass the desire for literacy does not become connected to critical consciousness until he hears Master Auld's "inch/ell" pronouncement. Douglass later appropriates the master's figure of speech, both metaphorically and literally, to express his critical relationship to literacy: "The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*" (40). Douglass's ironic identification with and subsequent subversive owning of the trope is significant to understanding his relationship to literacy in general. For Sisco, this subverting is a key moment in readying Douglass to move from his "pre-literate" stage, where he accepts the master's authoritative binaries (197), to a critical literacy, where, as Royer describes it, he "comes to understand . . . that he is not expelled from the social system . . . but rather inside it and oppressed. This critical understanding, this overcoming of naivete is crucial to Douglass's immanent literacy" (365).

It is useful, I think, from the above perspective in understanding Douglass's critical representation of literacy, to consider the narrative itself as a product of "transculturation," as Mary Louise Pratt has used the term in her influential article "Arts of the Contact Zone." Pratt discusses the production of texts as they occur in "social spaces [contact zones] where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths . . ." (34). She employs the term "transculturation" from ethnographic studies, as distinguished from the terms "acculturation" or "assimilation," "to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (36). Pratt sees transculturation as resulting in the autoethnographic text

in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts. (35)

Wendy Ryden

As Auld represents Douglass with his aphorism, Douglass *re-presents* himself, in a “dialogue” with that original representation (a dialogue that is very different from the rational master/slave dialogue of the *Orator*, which Douglass skeptically recounts for the reader). And so the *Narrative*, like the representation of literacy within it, is not assimilationist but rather auto-ethnographic, involving “a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms . . . to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding” (Pratt 35).

This conflicted model of literacy, which Douglass’s text presents in opposition to liberal, assimilationist conceptions of reading, writing, and education found in the literacy myth, is also understandable in terms of “crisis,” as Shoshana Felman uses the term to describe her work with teaching Holocaust testimony. Felman asks, “Is there a relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education?” (13). She later answers this question by saying

teaching . . . takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught: it has passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which . . . the recipients . . . can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but no one could recognize, and that no one could therefore truly *learn, read* or put to *use*. (55)

Douglass’s story contrasts with that put forth in the liberal understanding of literacy because it occurs in the kind of crisis that Felman references. Without the crisis of interdiction, the embattled conditions under which the slave encounters education, Douglass might have acquired information, might have learned his letters from Mistress Auld, but without knowing how to *read* or to *recognize*, in the critical sense that Felman suggests. The autoethnographic text that Douglass produces is by definition a conflicted one that cannot be called forth by nurturance alone, as the pre-corrupted Mistress attempts to do in giving the gift of literacy. In effect, Douglass’s model is telling us that literacy cannot be *given* in that sense; rather it must be *taken* if it is to produce the critical consciousness that leads to emancipation. While “giving” implies passivity, “taking” suggests an active, crisis-induced relationship to language and education.

Conflicted Literacy

Douglass's version of the literacy story then contrasts markedly with that contained in the iconic representation often offered to students. This conservative "misreading" by teachers and students alike of Douglass attests to the power of the literacy myth and its influence over the reception and production of texts concerned with representations of literacy and education. It is not surprising that students would reproduce this hegemonic version of literacy in their own narratives surrounding language and education. Those of us who teach literacy narratives can use Douglass's *Narrative* to help us understand under what conditions people and texts begin to interrogate prevailing assumptions about literacy. How can the literacy narrative help position the writer into a critical stance vis à vis the culture of language and education? On the one hand, at the risk of sounding pessimistic, I think one possible conclusion to draw from Douglass's model of conflicted literacy is that the classroom-spawned literacy narrative is subject to significant limitations in this regard, limitations that we should acknowledge rather than uncritically accommodate. As critical pedagogues have noted, the paradigm of oppositional, crisis-based learning is not one that can be easily transferred to the classroom, both for practical and ethical reasons,³ and thus the likelihood of such writings producing the critical subjectivity modeled by Douglass is perhaps slim. But, on the other hand, I do think the scholarship on Douglass points us in some possible directions, especially where that scholarship intersects with rhetorical theorization of subject positioning.

One of the features of the *Narrative* that has drawn critical attention is the representation of Douglass's DuBoisian double-consciousness as he positions himself in relation to the discourses that interpellate him. While, as noted above, some critics have found problematic Douglass's ability to speak for an experience and people from which he, necessarily it seems, has distanced himself, these critics also see this as Douglass's significant strength. "The dual awareness, the ability to be located by two signification systems at once," writes Wardrop, "is what makes Douglass so crucial an American writer" (655) and what allows him to "jostle and disrupt the dominant signifying system" (649) as he attempts to solve the slave's ontological crisis of language. Indeed, Wardrop tells us that this kind of "dismantling," this critical entry into language, "is the only means by which Douglass can participate in the play of signifiers of the dominant culture" (653).

This emphasis on dual awareness coincides with what Soliday has identified as the critical feature of a successful literacy narrative. In her account of using such narratives in the basic writing class, she defines a "successful literacy story" as one that "goes beyond recounting 'what happened'

Wendy Ryden

to foreground the distance between an earlier and a present self conscious of living in time” (514). While such a subject positioning does not necessarily imply a *critical* stance, it does lay the ground for an examination of “a crossing between language worlds” (515) similar to, as she notes, what is enacted in Douglass’s account. Soliday provides an example of a student whose narrative “I” in an essay exploring questions of literacy “is not monological” (519)—that is to say, the student is able to arrive at the analysis that she “speak[s] many Englishes” (517), a conclusion that is more complex than the simple assimilationist model contained in the literacy myth. Soliday encourages literacy narratives where

movements between worlds take on a liminal rather than a dichotomous character. If students and teachers begin to see their languages as mutually shaping, they also recognize their double-voicedness and, in so doing, can see the self as rooted in other cultures yet also belonging to, becoming transformed by, and in turn transforming school cultures. (522)

While this expectation for the literacy narrative is admirable—and indeed perhaps most possible for many of the students placed in basic writing classes whose subject positions in relation to dominant discourse might begin to approximate Douglass’s—the “lesson” of Douglass advises us to proceed cautiously in our endeavors. We should be careful not to overstate the claims for the critical awareness engendered through this classroom genre and, more importantly, to be wary of the power of the literacy myth to absorb and appropriate critical models in a way that does disservice to the potential of critical literacy.

Notes

1. In his preface to the MLA’s *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, James C. Hall contextualizes the volume by reminding us that Douglass’s work “is available in many affordable paperback editions and is regularly excerpted in introductory American literature and composition anthologies” (xii). David L. Dudley cites such ubiquity as “evidence . . . that instructors who might never have the opportunity to teach an American or African American literature course are nevertheless teaching Douglass in other settings and that thousands of students—most of whom are not literature majors—are reading it” (133).

Conflicted Literacy

2. Lester Faigley describes a parallel dilution in his discussion of a writing textbook's treatment of a John Edgar Wideman essay. Wideman talks about his still unabated anger regarding a conversation he had in college with a white student who criticized his taste in rhythm and blues. The textbook gloss tells students that the selection leads "us beyond Wideman's personal story, helping us to generalize from his particular experience. Indeed, autobiography should not only provide insight into one person's life but also teach us about human experience in general" (Faigley 160). But Faigley asks:

What is the universal lesson to be drawn from Wideman's questions? . . . Translating Wideman's rage into a lesson on human experience in general becomes a way of avoiding his particular experience and of not seeing the pervasive racism he encountered. Allowing students to respond, "Yes, I've been angry too, and that's a universal emotion" permits them not to examine why Wideman's anger is so debilitating . . . why he still carries that anger after many years have passed. If there is a universal lesson to be drawn from the treatment of Wideman's narrative . . . , perhaps it is how easily the experiences of those who are different from us can be appropriated. (160)

3. See, for example, Fishman's and McCarthy's discussion of "safe" versus confrontational pedagogy inspired by Pratt's contact zone theorizations. They argue for an alternative "Deweyan" model to confrontational pedagogy, one in which students are gradually introduced to cultural critique.

Works Cited

- Adisa, Opal Palmer. "Frederick Douglass." *The Teachers and Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Wesley Brown. New York: Teachers and Writers, 1996. 35-50.
- Barrett, Lindon. "The Experience of Slave Narratives: Reading Against Authenticity." *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. James C. Hall. New York: MLA, 1999. 31-41.
- Bergner, Gwen. "Myths of Masculinity: The Oedipus Complex and Douglass's 1845 Narrative." *Psychoanalysis of Race*. Ed. Christopher Lane. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. 241-60.
- Bishop, Wendy, ed. *The Subject Is Reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000.

Wendy Ryden

- Brown, Wesley, ed. *The Teachers and Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. New York: Teachers and Writers, 1996.
- Burt, John. "Learning to Write: The Narrative of Frederick Douglass." *Western Humanities Review* 42.4 (1988): 330-44.
- Dickerson, Mary Jane. "'Shades of Deeper Meaning': On Writing Autobiography." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 9 (1989): 133-50. *JAC Online*. 27 Dec. 2004 <http://jac.gsu.edu/jac/9/Articles/11.htm>.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. New York: Bantam, 1989.
- Dudley, David L. "Teaching Douglass's Narrative in the World Literature Survey." *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. James C. Hall. New York: MLA, 1999. 133-38.
- Eldred, Jane Carey, and Peter Mortensen. "Reading Literacy Narratives." *College English* 54.5 (1992): 512-39.
- Ernest, John. "Qualified Knowledge: Douglass and Harriet Jacobs." *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. James C. Hall. New York: MLA, 1999. 110-16.
- Faigley, Lester. *Fragments of Rationality*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1992.
- Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 13-61.
- Fishman, Stephen M., and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy. "Teaching for Student Change: A Deweyan Alternative to Radical Pedagogy." *College Composition and Communication* 47.3 (1996): 342-66.
- Gibson, Donald. "Reconciling Public and Private in Frederick Douglass' Narrative." *American Literature* 57.4 (1985): 549-69.
- Goddu, Teresa A., and Craig V. Smith. "Scenes of Writing in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*: Autobiography and the Creation Of Self." *Southern Review* 25.4 (1989): 822-40.
- Gunner, Jeanne. "Iconic Discourse: The Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." *Journal of Basic Writing* 17.2 (1998): 1-18.
- Hall, James C., ed. *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: MLA, 1999.
- Henkel, Michele. "Forging Identity through Reinterpellation: The Ideological Project of Frederick Douglass's Narrative." *Literature and Psychology* 48.1-2 (2002): 89-101.
- Higbee, Mark. "Frederick Douglass and Today's College Classroom." *Thought and Action* 16.1 (2000): 41-54.

Conflicted Literacy

- Kuner, Charles. "Using Douglass's Narrative as Motivation for Student Writing." *The Teachers and Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Wesley Brown. New York: Teachers and Writers, 1996. 69-73.
- Leverenz, David. *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Martin, Terry J. "A Slave in Form . . . [But not] in Fact: Frederick Douglass and the Paradox of Transcendence." *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas* 12.1 (1995): 1-4.
- Miller, Keith D., and Ruth Ellen Kocher. "Shattering Kidnapper's Heavenly Union: Interargumentation in Douglass's Oratory and Narrative." *Approaches to Teaching Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. James C. Hall. New York: MLA, 1999. 81-87.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 91 NY: MLA, 1991. 33-40.
- Prettyman, Alfred. "Frederick Douglass." *The Teachers and Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Wesley Brown. New York: Teachers and Writers, 1996. 82-86.
- Royer, Daniel J. "The Process of Literacy as Communal Involvement in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass." *African American Review* 28.3 (1994): 363-74. Ebsco. Long Island University 21 Oct. 2004. <http://web2.epnet.com>.
- Sisco, Lisa. "'Writing in the Spaces Left': Literacy as a Process of Becoming in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 9.3 (1995): 195-227.
- Smit, David. "Revising the Literacy Autobiography." Conference on College Composition and Communication. Chicago. 22 March 2002.
- Soliday, Mary. "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives." *College English* 56.5 (1994): 511-26.
- Thomas, Lorenzo. "Knowledge Is Power." *The Teachers and Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Wesley Brown. New York: Teachers and Writers, 1996. 1-7.
- Wallace, Maurice. "Constructing the Black Masculine: Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and the Sublimits of African American Autobiography." *No More Separate Spheres: A Next Wave of American Studies*. Ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002. 237-62.
- Wardrop, Daneen. "'While I Am Writing': Webster's 1825 Spelling Book, the Ell, and Frederick Douglass's Positioning of Language." *African American Review* 32.4 (1998): 649-60.