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Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Critical Reconsiderations (Autumn, 1988), pp. 49-64

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469320>

Accessed: 24/08/2009 14:34

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Real Life, Literary Criticism, and the Perils of Bourgeoisification

Harold Fromm

IT IS HARD TO DOUBT that the vast majority of literary works were produced as expressions of passionate involvement with life rather than as aesthetic objects. The notion of a purely aesthetic artifact intended to be “art” is, in any case, a relatively recent one in the history of civilization, and the veneration of the artist as a unique individual soul—rather than as an agent of transcendence or the state—is a post-Enlightenment product. Ancient cave drawings, Roman sculpture and friezes, medieval paintings, early music and literature were practical artifacts intimately tied up with the aims and qualities of daily life, more often than not religious or political “speech acts,” and later on, as in the case of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, entertainment and sources of livelihood. On the other hand, what distinguishes these products from those we regard as nonaesthetic are the curious supererogatory skills of their producers, skills that seem not to be immediate agencies in the affairs of birth, copulation, and death—or even money-grubbing. This extra element of “play,” this “purposiveness without purpose,” lifts these works out of the realm of lived life into a more expansive and pleasure-oriented universe. Atheists can listen to Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* with as much gratification as the devout, while yuppies can hang reproductions of cave paintings on their walls even though they have no anxieties about their status with the gods. In a word, even the most practical specimens of what we decide to call “art” are perceived as having an aesthetic dimension that makes them the art we claim them to be. Nor need the artist even have intended to exhibit a skill-in-itself divorced from his practical goal, as long as such a skill seems to shine out from his artifact.

Although there will always be people who become interested in these media in themselves—the languages, methods, or skills whereby lived life undergoes aesthetic transmutation—when intellectual or aesthetic analysis takes place too soon after the artifacts have been expressed as “life” (and a fortiori while they still have currency as “life”), such attention to secondary qualities is apt to seem decadent, Alexandrine, or positively sacrilegious. For the customary pattern has

been that analysis of this kind takes place when the artifacts in question have ceased to serve their original practical ends as vehicles of affect, after the funeral baked meats have at least had a chance to cool. Although Mrs. Gaskell's novels about the impoverished working class in nineteenth-century Manchester or Dickens's novels about the exploitation of children in factories were of course understood at the time to be "art," examinations of them were usually predicated upon their power to produce life-imitating experiences in their readers. Today, with the problems they dramatized no longer existing in the same forms as before, they are likely to be studied more impersonally and abstractly as aesthetic or historical artifacts divorced from any emotional force they may be capable of providing. As a matter of fact, one of today's greatest pretensions is that works of art can be examined in a purely "scientific" way—as language, psychology, philosophy, completely separated from the interests of any human audience for whom they were produced in the first place. And as the academicization of everyday life has speeded up since the eighteenth century, leading eventually to today's "information society," we now find commonplace the turning of "life" into subjects of study while the life is still quiveringly vital. Not only novels and poems of living writers, but the songs of the Beatles, films, TV programs—what we now call popular culture—have become subjects for dissertations, books, biographies, as the search for new materials and "information" becomes more and more desperate.

This rapid appropriation of both life and "expression" as materials for scholarly analysis can seem especially outrageous when the distinctive qualities and aims of the originals have been cast aside in order to pursue entirely other and different aims. And if politics, careerism, and the marketplace enter the picture, things can only seem worse.

A particularly concrete and intense enactment of these rather abstract considerations took place recently in the form of a furious debate between three black scholars in the normally sedate forum of *New Literary History*.¹ With politeness thrown to the winds in what was for the principals a battle for survival, the reader becomes a voyeur at a singular exhibit of Hegelian "World History," a drama of *geistesgeschichte* in action. One can see in this conflict how inevitably and inexorably cultural positions develop, how certain stages of social evolution must necessarily be traversed, how an Emersonian phylogeny lurks behind the apparently "free" adoption of moral and intellectual positions. Not the least remarkable aspect of the initiating essay, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary History," by Joyce A. Joyce, was the fact of its acceptance in the first place. An

impassioned piece, written in a voice strikingly different from the canonical ones of *NLH*, its very acceptance became one of the issues in the debate.

Joyce, an English professor at the University of Maryland, expresses her remorse at having been unsympathetic to a student who found an essay by James Baldwin difficult to understand. In defending Baldwin—she later came to feel—she was betraying an aspiring young black student by expressing her own “contradictions and elitism” (335). What Professor Joyce meant by this sense of betrayal (if I may interpret here) was that she had behaved like a rootless, professionalized, upwardly mobile intellectual rather than like a sisterly black, with the implication that such behavior means taking up a white “professional” point of view, a view in which texts, trendy ideas, and academic success take precedence over human obligations, especially to one’s “people.”

Since she had made use of them as negative examples, two other black academics were invited to enter the picture, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr., both well-known cultural critics and Afro-American scholars. Contrasting them unfavorably with earlier black critics, Joyce remarked that “the function of the [black] creative writer and the literary scholar [in the past] was to guide, to serve as an intermediary in explaining the relationship between Black people and those forces that attempt to subdue them,” whereas now there is a “denial or rejection of this role” (338–39) on the part of scholars like Gates and Baker. As Professor Joyce saw them, instead of acknowledging that black literature is a cry of the oppressed engaged in a practical struggle for survival as human beings, contemporary mainstream academics like Gates and Baker treat black literature simply as another set of “texts” to be processed according to the needs of careerism by means of the currently fashionable “poststructuralist” methodologies.

Speaking of today’s reigning theorists, Joyce remarks that “their pseudoscientific language is distant and sterile. These writers evince their powers of ratiocination with an overwhelming denial of most, if not all, the senses.” By constantly using such terms as “code,” “sign,” “signifier,” “narratology,” and “text,” these writers “create the very alienation and estrangement” that they are attempting to undo (339–40).

Although she speaks of them only in passing, Professors Gates and Baker take up the gauntlet with a vengeance, for as a fellow black Joyce has struck sensitive nerves, always primed to be on the defensive. Gates, a professor of English, comparative literature, and African studies at Cornell, is the veritable leader of academic Afro-Amer-

ican critical studies in this country. He has produced so many books and articles in recent years, either as sole author or editor, that it is barely possible to keep track of their titles. He is a gifted, sometimes brilliant intellectual: rhetorical, pugnacious, relentless, engaged in conducting a twenty-ring circus all at once and with considerable skill. He is also a paradigmatic exemplar of what I have come to call "academic capitalism," an enterprise that is complicated in his case by an admixture of self-righteous obsession with race, from which he is nonetheless able to extract every known academic perquisite. His most salient characteristics are his two well-worn metaphysical jumpsuits—one white, the other black—which he is able to zip on and off, sometimes in midsentence, with dizzying bravado as rhetorical needs urge him on. Although as an intellectual he is as white and bourgeois as I, he is nevertheless a virtuoso at exploiting white liberal guilt. Thus, he can play everyone against everyone else while presuming to emerge with virtue unscathed. His sense of unscathedness, however, is the personal myth that causes his undoing, for in reality he is no more pure than anyone else. It is principally his role in academic capitalism that has irritated Joyce A. Joyce, since as a black agent thereof he has risen like a rocket in the academy by alchemizing the primal metal of black writings into "texts" of gold, subjecting them to the currently fashionable "white" critical methodologies, and living off the academic capital produced therefrom. Furthermore, since "texts" are merely "woven goods" rather than the "expression" associated with "books," the academic textualist resembles a sewing machine operator processing yards of cloth, each as sewable as any other. Fancy stitches are what make for distinction, promotion, and bourgeoisification, yet while bourgeoisification is invariably part of even the most avant-garde academic's hidden agenda, radical good form requires that it always be furiously denied.

Houston Baker, though treated by Gates with the deference of a disciple, is in reality less of a master and more of a disciple than Gates. His earlier book, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*, published in 1980, is a traditionally conceived work written in a clear and accomplished prose, but already dominated by a prior conversion to linguistic and rhetorical concepts that superimpose a grid of gratuitous complexities upon black writings. Concepts like "foregrounding" and "Sinnfeld" contribute about as much to an enhanced understanding of these works as Monsieur Jourdain's awareness that he is talking "prose." Baker's more recent book, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, is an astounding but mostly unreadable mixture of earlier writing in his lucid mode and more recent essays in the clotted, derivative, obfuscated jargon he has pro-

duced since his almost instantaneous—but much too late—conversion to Continental epigonism (which he describes in his introduction like some radiant epiphany that transformed his life). Thus—to quote a passage at random—“Epistemological cataclysms in historical discourse bring to view dimensions of experience excluded from extant accounts. And in the reordering effected by such ruptures (i.e., their constitution of revised models), one discovers not only new historical terms but also the variant historicity of the statements and terms of a traditional discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explains. . . .”² Like Johnson’s woman preacher, Baker is a marvel not so much because he has managed to do this well as because he has managed to do it at all in the course of an overnight transformation. Indeed, Baker’s own Achilles heel is his excessive receptivity to the influence of gurus altogether, an influence, incidentally, that he himself traces in an essay about one of his English professors at Howard University. Speaking of this teacher, Baker observes: “He had crafted an Oxonian mask behind which one could only surmise black beginnings. . . . he enjoyed using philosophical words that he knew would send the curious among us scurrying to the dictionary.”³

Joyce A. Joyce, however, is not buying any of this. Her essay’s conclusion is worth reproducing at length:

Since the Black creative writer has always used language as a means of communication to bind people together, the job of the Black literary critic should be to find a point of merger between the communal, utilitarian, phenomenal nature of Black literature and the aesthetic or linguistic—if you will—analyses that illuminate the “universality” of a literary text. Rather than being a “linguistic event” or a complex network of linguistic systems that embody the union of the signified and the signifier independent of phenomenal reality [i.e., a mere “text”], Black creative art is an act of love which attempts to destroy estrangement and elitism by demonstrating a strong fondness or enthusiasm for freedom and an affectionate concern for the lives of people, especially Black people. (343)

Taking up Joyce’s remark that black creative art is “an act of love,” Gates—borrowing some lines from Tina Turner—entitles his reply “What’s Love Got To Do with It?” Unfortunately, Turner seems to have been thinking about sex while Joyce is thinking of *agape*. This proves to be only the first of Gates’s problems. “I must confess,” he replies, “that I am bewildered by Joyce Joyce’s implied claim that to engage in black critical theory is to be, somehow, antiblack. . . . I find this sort of claim to be both false and a potentially dangerous—and dishonest—form of witch-hunting or nigger-baiting” (346). And he adds, very plausibly, “It is merely a mode of critical masturbation to

praise a black text simply because it is somehow 'black' " (347). He then concedes that, in the past, black literature and criticism were put primarily to practical rather than aesthetic uses. But today, "our increasingly central role in 'the profession' " has changed the nature of enlightened black criticism.

We critics in the 1980s have the especial privilege of explicating the black tradition in ever closer detail. We shall not meet this challenge by remaining afraid of, or naive about, literary theory; rather, we will only inflict upon our literary tradition the violation of the uninformed reading. We are the keepers of the black literary tradition. . . . (352-53)

Let me state clearly that I have no fantasy about my readership: I write for our writers and for our critics. If I write a book review, say, for a popular Afro-American newspaper, I write in one voice; if I write a close analysis of a black text and publish it in a specialist journal, I choose another voice, or voices. Is not that my "responsibility," to use Joyce Joyce's word, and my privilege as a writer? But I do not think my task as a critic is to lead black people to "freedom." My task is to explicate black texts. That's why *I* became a critic. (357)

Gates then goes on to note that his work is in its own way political. "How can the use of literary analysis to explicate the racist social text in which we still find ourselves be anything *but* political? To be political, however, does not mean that I have to write at the level of diction of a Marvel comic book" (358).

Houston Baker takes a very different approach. He begins by describing an earlier public conflict he had had with another black woman scholar, Deborah McDowell, also "conservative" like Joyce, at the 1984 conference of the English Institute. He then expresses surprise mixed with pleasure at *NLH* opening its doors to black studies when it had previously been entirely Euro-American, but he is troubled by the fact that this door-opener involved yet another conservative black woman scholar who is attacking somewhat radical fellow black critics. He then goes on for several pages magisterially enumerating the inaccuracies and errors in Joyce's essay. And then he explodes his bomb:

. . . it is impossible to believe that an essay focused on Anglo-American criticism as dreadfully flawed by factual mistakes as Professor Joyce's work on Afro-American criticism would have been accepted or printed by a major critical or theoretical journal. Why, then, was her essay accepted and published by *New Literary History*?

The most charitable explanation is that the journal's editors were victims of a too casual reader's report. A less charitable, and, I think, more accurate

view, is that many people share Professor Joyce's essential animosity toward recent modes of critical and theoretical discussion that have enlarged the universe of discourse surrounding Afro-American expressive culture. Their animosity springs from the fact that the new critical and theoretical modes marking investigation of black expressive culture so clearly escape the minstrel simplicity that Anglo-Americans have traditionally imagined and assigned (and that some Afro-Americans have willingly provided and accepted) as the farthest reaches of the black voice in the United States. (366)

Describing his own avant-garde interests and their failure to harmonize with either a mainstream or an academic majority, Baker castigates "black willingness to tread conservative/minstrel paths, and a multi-ethnic fear in the academy of new and difficult modes of critical and theoretical study" (368) and then concludes: "Further, to publish a grossly erroneous attack on Afro-American literary criticism in a journal traditionally devoted to Euro-American points of view and directed to a white audience could, I suppose, be profitable in an academic world where any attack whatsoever on anything Afro-American whatsoever is taken as a valuable sortie" (368-69).

Baker's response is preposterous to a self-discrediting degree when we consider the wide-ranging interests of *NLH* and *Critical Inquiry*, not to mention a multitude of other journals like *Cultural Critique*, *Signs*, *Telos*, and so on, that thrive on avant-gardism and ethnic studies. But just as Baker is still able to fancy that he represents a real avant-garde when his work is in fact indiscriminately derivative and epigonic, he is equally able to pretend that black critics and criticism are still not flourishing, neither in the academy nor in the journals, even in 1986. Not an inch is conceded, nor will he even refer to the Modern Language Association and its meetings and journal, which have been nothing if not receptive to pluralism and minorities. But Baker's real problem is grandiosity, not Joyce A. Joyce or *NLH*.

Given the powerful replies of Gates and Baker, however, one would have supposed that Professor Joyce, lacking their big guns, would wrap up this conflict with a reply both inadequate and desperate. But it is one of the fascinating aspects of this debate's complexity that despite what seems to me a vulnerable ambivalence in her position and her relatively inexperienced rhetoric compared to that of Gates and Baker (who are masters at this sort of thing), her reply is devastating. For this debate is not just about intellectual issues like avant-garde black criticism, or racial issues like the power or powerlessness of blacks in the journals and in the academy, or socio-ethical issues like attitudes of the races toward each other and toward themselves; it is also about matters like self-deception, hypocrisy, profes-

sionalism, and the political by-products of personal struggles for power and reward in the academy. And when all of these are considered, the problems which even I find present in Professor Joyce's position seem of secondary importance in relation to the ethical cruces suggested by her reply, although the other principals may be too self-involved to have noticed it. "Touché," says the fencer in Thurber's famous cartoon, while the severed head of his opponent looks on rather surprised.

Professor Joyce's reply, subtitled "Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," launches into a direct confrontation: "I knew that my two Black colleagues would not respond with either geniality or comradeship," it begins. Then it slashes away at Gates's use of Tina Turner:

This song represents the denial of love and the degeneration of values that begin with self-love and are reflected in the way one human being responds to another. . . . And equally insidious is the video that flaunts the Black woman as sex object for Black men *and* white men, as Turner, with bleached stylishly unkempt hair suggestive of the white blond . . . and wearing a tight leather skirt and jacket and very high heels that accentuate her shapely legs, struts down the street. This video and the song lure our young people into the world of glamour, rapacity, and ignorance. Unaware that they are being manipulated, the young Black women who imitate Tina Turner manifest the self-hatred and self-denial widespread among contemporary Black Americans. (372-73)

Joyce comments on how Baker and Gates have "overstate[d] their cases against what they see as my errors and misjudgments. Perhaps, in the past few years, they have used the obfuscating language and ideas of Derrida, Barthes, Paul de Man, Foucault, Kristeva, Althusser, Bakhtin, and others to cloak their difficulties. In Baker's case, I fear, the problem is much worse than an inability to read. His distortions of what I wrote and his more serious warping of what took place at the English Institute are, simply put, unethical" (373). All of these objections have more of truth than falsity about them, but even more cutting is her remark that "Gates and Baker have two standards for judgment, one by which they judge and adopt the ideas of European and American white males and the other by which they adjudicate the work of Black women. *They allow the one group greater latitude for metaphorical language than they do the other*" (374; my emphasis). She points out to Gates that his insistence that readers, particularly black ones, must work to understand difficult prose (since he does not want to write at the level of Marvel comics) is contradicted by his admission

that he chooses different voices depending on whether he is writing for the black masses or his colleagues. She raises questions about the reason the critic writes and for whom he writes. And after contrasting two pieces of black criticism, one straightforward, the other “academic” and avant-garde, she observes that “instead of inundating our works [i.e., black literature] with contrived references to fashionable scholars and philosophers who have decided that literature and life no longer have meaning and thus that existence is a game, the Black American critic . . . should be at the vanguard of a worldwide Black intellectual movement in much the same way as Du Bois, Wright, and C. L. R. James were” (378), in order to relate black literature to actual life in the world rather than to other critical “texts.” Speaking of Baker’s description of his project in the introduction to *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* as “a minute beginning in the labor of writing/righting American history and literary history,” she remarks: “We can only question then the reasons for the contradiction between the intended aim . . . and the semantic disjunctions that typify the essays in the text. . . . The entire collection is suffused with poststructuralist jargon” (379, 381).

Introducing her peroration, she approaches the very heart of the matter at hand. “I hope to show that my views of Black literary criticism are inextricably and unembarrassingly tied to my identity as a Black person and that Gates’s and Baker’s responses are, by nature, inextricably related to an absence of identity” (380). She explains this more concretely by adding that Gates maintains “that his mode of critical theory is Black critical theory. . . . and . . . that my objections to his analyses of Black literature suggest that he is antiblack. A significant difference exists between being ‘not’ Black and being antiblack. Of course, the real issue, the one that Gates refuses to let surface . . . concerns whether being a Black person who writes about Black literature makes one a Black critic” (381).

Joyce’s penultimate paragraph must be read in toto, since it is the most important one in her response:

Finally, Gates and Baker agree (since they are “ideal readers” for each other) that they are “spokespersons who move across ethnic and gender boundaries and who have decisively relinquished the role of simpleminded conservative spokespersons on behalf of a putatively simpleminded expressive culture.” These embarrassing words imply that those Black literary critics who worked to provide what is now the foundation of Afro-American literary criticism and whose ideas have been subsumed and reshaped by Gates and Baker are simpleminded. These final comments water the seeds that I have planted throughout this essay: While Black American literature and its criticism are rooted in an allegiance to Black people, Baker and Gates have

“relinquished” that allegiance. The first sign manifests itself in the hostile, warlike, ungracious nature of their responses to my essay. Although Baker goes so far as to suggest that Deborah McDowell should not have challenged him (the vanguard) in a “mixed” audience [at the English Institute], he has, as we can deduce from his language, no hesitation in attempting to make me appear mindless and backwards in the eyes of white society. He himself brings up the issue of the readership of *New Literary History*. Both he and Gates broke the most important code of the signifying tradition: they failed to attack [another black] by subversion (to speak in such a way that the master does not grasp their meaning). They failed to demonstrate love and respect for a Black sister. They do not understand that Black political involvement can be achieved even in the ivory towers of academe as well as on the streets and that an interrelationship exists between the two. Political involvement, the commitment to struggle for the movement of Blacks into all strata of society, means that neither should have censured *New Literary History* for accepting the work of a Black sister. They should have been committed to strategies for revision rather than to the proliferation of their individual ideas and to the protection of their egos. As literary critics, they should have been committed to the future of a Black American criticism that gains its strengths through challenges and trials rather than through censorship and bravado. (382–83)

The lessons to be learned from an exchange like this go far beyond the ostensible issues—to global ones that are not even raised by the principals. To begin with, Professor Joyce’s view that the structuralist and deconstructive methods of Gates and Baker violate the integrity of black literature and transform it from the record of a human struggle to a mere business operation for intellectuals can hardly be cast aside with a professional sneer. Certainly other critics than she have also taken this view. For example, in a recent article in *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Norman Harris criticizes both Gates and Robert Stepto on similar grounds. “My thesis here is that the New Black Formalism disfigures the literature it discusses while trivializing the dreams and aspirations of Afro-Americans in the world.”⁴ Referring to a somewhat arcane essay by Gates on Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, Harris remarks, “What Reed intended is at least open to question, but what he accomplished seems a clear part of a continuing struggle on the part of Afro-Americans to find the proper pose and voice to understand and change the world. In fact, the intertextuality in the novel which Gates takes as a sign that it is a post-modernist novel may well be hooked to similar techniques used by those who wrote slave narratives. . . . Indeed, Gates’s view seems accurate only if we view the novel as being directed at an essentially Euro-American audience. It is quite possible that Reed was

directing his work toward the various black communities" (42). And his essay concludes by noting that "the New Black Formalism ought to consider the purposes of literary criticism within the context of the spiritual (aesthetic) needs of black people" since Afro-American literature is "a literature that is so much more than words" (44).

Even more remarkable than this is an essay by Barbara Christian, also black, and a professor of Afro-American studies at Berkeley. In "The Race for Theory," referring to the academic hegemony of current theorists, she expresses concern that "theory" may be inappropriate for dealing with "emerging literatures." In what is virtually an echo of Professor Joyce, she notes that this hegemony is widely discussed, "but usually in hidden groups, lest we, who are disturbed by it, appear ignorant to the reigning academic élite. Among the folk who speak in muted tones are people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers, who have struggled for much longer than a decade to make their voices, their various voices, heard, and for whom literature is not an occasion for discourse among critics but is necessary nourishment for their people and one way by which they come to understand their lives better."⁵ As for the language of the reigning theorists, it "is repulsive to me and is one reason I raced from philosophy to literature, since the latter seemed to me to have the possibilities of rendering the world as large and as complicated as I experienced it, as sensual as I knew it was." And her conclusions resemble both Joyce's and Harris's:

Now I am being told that philosophers are the ones who write literature, that authors are dead, irrelevant, mere vessels through which their narratives ooze, that they do not work nor have they the faintest idea of what they are doing; rather they produce texts as disembodied as the angels. I am frankly astonished that scholars who call themselves Marxists or post-Marxists could seriously use such metaphysical language even as they attempt to deconstruct the philosophic tradition from which their language comes. And as a student of literature, I am appalled by the sheer ugliness of the language, its lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence constructions, its lack of pleasurable quality, its alienating quality. It is the kind of writing for which composition teachers would give a freshman a resounding F. (56)

One can well understand why Joyce, Harris, and Christian feel so deeply that this neoformalist criticism is a betrayal, an unclean and venal act in which the suffering and blood of black Americans—as well as a liberation that is still in progress—have been turned into a market commodity not completely removed from cabbage patch dolls and rock videos. When the classic writings of Afro-Americans are appropriated as mere "texts," patterns of words for deconstructive anal-

ysis by upwardly mobile academics—some of whom, to add insult to injury, are themselves black—it is not impossible to regard this as a milder form of medical experiments on prisoners in concentration camps. It is an appropriation of lived life for other ends, a violation of the Kantian imperative, a failure to distinguish between “for itself” and “in itself,” a blurring of the distinction between subjects and objects.

But set opposite this are a number of forces that Joyce and Harris fail to consider—those of self-consciousness, intellectuality, scholarship, history, knowledge—in a word, civilization. While thinking, analyzing, knowing, recording are violations of *being*, they are paradoxically the distinctively human activities that set us apart from the purely lived lives of animals. Professor Joyce’s sense of herself as a betrayer when she defends James Baldwin’s art over and above the aspirations of her black student is surely an epiphanal moment in the history of a consciousness, representing as it does a split in the self, a gulf between the obligations of blood and the obligations of mind. But if *Knowing* is a betrayal of *Being*, it is a betrayal that can’t be stopped without our ceasing to be human. Thoughts cannot be unthought, innocence cannot be reinstated, nor can purity be brought back (especially when “purity” itself is open to question). The belief that there are original pure thoughts or experiences that are subsequently defiled cannot be substantiated because we can never get back to thoughts or feelings to which nothing is prior. Our deepest and most sacred states of being derive from prior states, with nothing that is “given” absolutely. There is no inviolable self because the “purity” of the self has already been compromised by our first acts of thinking, by our first assimilations of the imprint of our environment. At what point then could we decide to say, “From now on thinking about this subject is prohibited”? For at that point, someone would be bound to ask, “Why stop here rather than somewhere else? Why is Thought Number Three evil but Thought Number Two sacred?”

Thus Joyce and Harris are both right and wrong when they object to the activities of Gates, Baker, and Stepto as sinister: the transformation of black literature into academic grist is indeed a sacrilege in the strictest sense. For here are these bourgeois mandarin types shedding crocodile tears about their black roots while at the same time cultivating those roots—with weird graftings superadded—for all they are worth, turning other people’s flesh not into lampshades but into pelf, power, and professorships in the decadent academy.

Yet that is what knowledge is, however sinister its darker side. Nor is it for nothing that knowing has been connected with evil (though

some people have believed it leads to a paradise happier far). But in this conflict between Being and Knowledge, even Professor Joyce has already been compromised: having partaken of the Tree of Knowledge (as professor and critic), she is past pure Being and well advanced into the deprivations of Knowing. Surely Gates is right when he says that it is wrong to praise a black text simply because it is black. "Does the propensity," he asks, "to theorize about a text or a literary tradition 'mar,' 'violate,' 'impair,' or 'corrupt' the 'soundness' of a purported 'original perfect state' of a black text or of the black tradition?" (350). In expressing his own love for the black tradition and its works, Gates gives us little grounds to doubt his sincerity, although he ambiguously adds, "I am as black as I ever was, which is just as black as I ever want to be" (358).

Still, if Joyce and Harris's view is not *intellectually* as persuasive as they suppose, why do we feel that their objections are powerful nonetheless? We feel so, I think, because the black revolution is not yet over and it seems too early to academicize it in cold blood. We feel too that the various forms of postmodern criticism have their own serious problems, problems that can reduce any literature to inconsequence and that particularly distort the unique aspects of the Afro-American literary condition. With its elimination of the author, its view of words as engaged in a synchronic free play with no reference to a "real" world, its reduction of writing to self-canceling antinomies that ultimately say everything and nothing, its mandarin and technological jargon, its real character as a New Formalism that nevertheless derides the old formalism of "New Criticism": given all of these it seems outrageously, blindly, tastelessly inappropriate because, whether intentionally or not, it *does* appear to trivialize, as Norman Harris claims, the writings to which it fastens itself at the very same moment that these writings are working in the world.

When the chief practitioners of this variety of Afro-American criticism happen themselves to be blacks, but blacks who have left their roots far behind as they become ultra-bourgeois academic superstars; when for all practical purposes these black critics are "white" while retaining a privileged access to people whose plight provides the material basis for their own eminently successful escape—one does not have to possess unduly sensitive moral faculties to find grounds for protest. In reply to Gates's objection that he is not "antiblack," Professor Joyce explained that "a significant difference exists between being 'not' Black and being antiblack." By this, of course, she meant that Gates is essentially a white critic making use of black writings while reaping the benefits of his blackness. He himself refers to "our increasingly central role in 'the profession'" and adds that "I do not

think my task as a critic is to lead black people to 'freedom.' My task is to explicate black texts. That's why *I* became a critic." But at the same time as they engage in such admirably candid confessions, both Gates and Houston Baker are apt to veer back to a sort of "minstrelsy" of their own when it suits them. Thus, Baker, in the process of exploiting the resources of white bourgeoisification in the academy, in the act of escaping from "minstrelsy," can allow himself to charge *New Literary History* with publishing Joyce's essay because "any attack whatsoever on anything Afro-American whatsoever is taken as a valuable sortie." This switch from scapegoat to sage and back again is much too facile for comfort.

Professor Joyce is also quite right to be outraged by Baker's anger at being criticized at the English Institute by a black woman while he himself goes on "unconscionably" to abuse Joyce herself in the pages of *New Literary History*. For her, this is another instance of the way in which blackness is at one and the same time used to propel a rising career while protecting it from assaults, not only by whites but by fellow blacks as well. This selective blackness, with its patronizing treatment of women, is the real basis of Joyce's protest, for her criticism of Gates and Baker is essentially a charge of moral blackmail against members of her own "family" who do not hesitate to kick her down so that they can rise up.

This ongoing debate derives most of its interest not from the rightness or wrongness of its principals' positions so much as from its exhibition of an evolving, conflicted consciousness. The case of Richard Rodriguez, whose writings describe his gradual separation as an intellectual from his Mexican-American family, his early achievement of fame as a token gifted member of a minority, and his surprising rejection of the academic perquisites that were heaped upon him, is not nearly so painful to witness. For Rodriguez was unusually conscious of his own psychology as well as those of his environments, and he quickly realized not only that you can't go home again, but that once you have chosen where you *are* going, you have to accept the consequences accompanying that choice. But in the present case, things have not worked out quite so well. Though Professor Joyce's love and loyalty with regard to her people can only command respect, and though her conscience as a professor can only be admired, her conflicted roles as black and as intellectual involve a psychic split that can never be healed without an alteration of perspective and a transvaluation of values. This is, however, a very common dilemma, experienced by everyone who has grown away from his family because of rejection of ethnicity, change of social class, or increased education. And in order to function as an intellectual, love—though one cer-

tainly doesn't like to say it—is simply not enough. (I think, however, that Professor Gates has blundered in citing Tina Turner on this matter, for it betrays his somewhat hardboiled and excessively “playful” postmodern sensibility—and there is a point at which “playful” melts into “irresponsible.”)

But Professor Joyce has, nevertheless, caught Gates and Baker at a very vulnerable point not only in their own careers but in the careers of black studies and black liberation as well. There is no doubt that their services to black studies have been immense. They have lifted them out of the “right-on” folk-sentimental mutual backslapping of the sixties and given respectability to a university department that more often than not was hard pressed to justify its existence beyond power politics. But they have not yet come fully to terms with bourgeoisification, not only its profound connection to white mainstream culture, but their own indebtedness to it, without which they wouldn't even exist in their sometimes smug present incarnations. Like many other kinds of privileged intellectuals, they have yet to appreciate the general desirability of being middle class in America—even while enjoying its benefits—or to realize the extent to which they have not pulled themselves into it by their own bootstraps, even with all their superior gifts. Indeed, you don't have to be a neoconservative to recognize that individual success is less often due to prodigious gifts than to institutions that are already in place when you appear on the scene, institutions that have come about through *other peoples' efforts* rather than your own. Still, Gates's accomplishments are remarkable enough for him finally to throw away his two jumpsuits, to accept his bourgeois identity, to recognize Joyce's valid objections to various rootless (and ruthless) aspects of postmodern criticism, particularly in their application to black literature, and to acknowledge that both he and Professor Baker are now part of the Establishment, estranged from any supposed moral purity they may once have presumed to enjoy as blacks, while sharing the same obligations and liabilities as any other successful bourgeois professionals—obligations that must be met not in some nebulous future when perfect justice reigns on earth and racism has disappeared, but right now. Perhaps *that's* what love's got to do with it.

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NOTES

1 Joyce A. Joyce, “The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism”; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “‘What's Love Got To Do with It?': Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom”; Houston A. Baker, Jr., “In Dubious Battle”; and

Joyce A. Joyce, " 'Who the Cap Fit': Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," *New Literary History*, 18 (1987) 335-44, 345-62, 363-69, 371-84; hereafter cited in text.

2 Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, 1984), p. 61.

3 Houston A. Baker, Jr., "What Charles Knew: Homage to an English Teacher," *New York Times Book Review*, 22 Mar. 1987, p. 3.

4 Norman Harris, " 'Who's Zoomin' Who': The New Black Formalism," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 20 (1987), 39; hereafter cited in text.

5 Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, 6 (1987), 53; hereafter cited in text.