

Forum

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Whither Lyric Studies?

TO THE EDITOR:

In her essay "After the Critique of Lyric" (123 [2008]: 195–200), Rei Terada cites two papers I presented at the 2006 MLA convention as evidence of a new direction in lyric studies. Despite her respectful citation of my work, I must disagree with Terada's assessment of where the field has been and where it should go.

Referring to my papers, as well as those delivered by Ziv Neeman, Tyrone Williams, and Lori Emerson, Terada applauds what she called "the 2006 convention's generic openness," heard in "more conversation about popular work and noncanonical and avant-garde work" than at previous conventions (196). It may seem churlish to quibble with a compliment, but the "avant-garde" poet I discussed was Charles Bernstein, a member of the executive committee of the MLA's Division on Poetry (1998–2002) and Discussion Group for the Bibliography and Textual Studies (2004–09), a poet whose most attentive reader, Marjorie Perloff, presided as the MLA president during the 2006 convention. Since I began attending the convention during the 1990s, my impression has been that, if anything, the MLA devotes too much attention to self-professed "avant-garde work" while neglecting literature that does not conform to a disciplinary understanding rooted in a military metaphor.

A broader difference emerges, though, when Terada considers how literary studies might develop. Discussing how the papers contextualized lyric poems across different fields such as hip-hop and computer-generated poetry, she asserts, "Now the associations justify themselves, as they should, in particular conceptual conclusions about nationalism, humanness, media culture, and other sociopolitical and philosophical problems. If 'lyric' is a concept that will help us think, it's because it helps us think about something besides lyric" (196). This claim asks lyric

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to “justify” itself by performing an unsuitable task. Whether as a concept or an instance, lyric primarily helps us to think lyrically. It frustrates those interested only in “conclusions,” “conceptual” or not. For this reason, the art form and its analysis offer a poor means to resolve “sociopolitical and philosophical problems.” Instead, interdisciplinary analysis should clarify differences between the works under consideration; it should sharpen powers of discernment and quality of attention. In my work on hip-hop’s use of rhyme, for instance, I am interested in how it challenges contemporary print-based poetry’s use of the same technique. Such analysis seeks to reveal the two forms’ limitations and their accomplishments. For this reason, Terada’s rousing call, “Let’s let ‘lyric’ dissolve into literature and ‘literature’ into culture,” advocates a confusion that literary studies ought to resist. Instead, as other colloquium participants observe, “lyric” needs to be defined more precisely, enabling more accurate, perceptive readings.

Perhaps a generational difference resides at the heart of my differences with Terada. The developments she sees as novel strike me as commonsensical. When poetry scholars attend to the most interesting language that surrounds them, whether in hip-hop or in computer-generated texts, I see evidence of poetry’s influence and the challenge the art faces. As I noted in one of my presentations, a poem offers a model of curiosity, but curiosity enjoys little cultural standing. Poetry demands and rewards a careful concentration, an inquisitiveness about everything the text evokes and avoids. Regardless of the grander claims sometimes made for it, poetry teaches little else so well.

David Caplan
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Reply:

Regarding David Caplan’s first point, I don’t see how my observation of improved generic openness on poetry panels at the 2006 MLA convention as a whole can be weakened by the fact that one of his papers treated Charles Bernstein.

As for the second and more substantive point, although I’m glad that Caplan finds it commonsensical for poetry scholars to “attend to the most interesting language that surrounds them” regardless of genre or canonicity, his letter registers the continuing tension that this commonsensical idea produces. Despite his own interest in hip-hop and Bernstein, he thinks that “if anything, the MLA devotes too much attention to self-professed ‘avant-garde work,’” would like genres and disciplines to be further defined, and finds it an appropriate goal for research to “reveal” the “limitations and . . . accomplishments” of compared forms or techniques. It’s true that if these are one’s main goals, the fact that one works on hip-hop may not change anything. I find it hard to believe that they really are Caplan’s main goals, as opposed to explaining the reasons why a form’s limitations and accomplishments appear as such. Unless formal phenomena are to be experienced as naturalized objects of which one produces ever more “accurate” interpretations, formal qualities cannot stand by themselves as objects of a curiosity that does not extend to the sociopolitical and the philosophical. I didn’t claim, however, that research should “resolve” problems; I wrote that it should be conducted conceptually and lead to “conceptual conclusions.” Interesting conclusions will often have to do with the ambiguity of the problems in view or the inadequacy of current concepts. It was my perception that most of the poetry papers at the convention understood the need to work with language in this way and thus acknowledged that contemplation of the details of lyric forms per se neither has nor merits much cultural value. I was pleasantly surprised—for reasons that Caplan’s letter now reminds me of—that the poetry panels at the convention seemed to take this for granted.

Rei Terada
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Theories of Relativity

TO THE EDITOR:

Jonathan Stone’s essay “Polyphony and the Atomic Age: Bakhtin’s Assimilation of an