

theories and
methodologies

The Specter of Interdisciplinarity

BRENT HAYES EDWARDS

BRENT HAYES EDWARDS, a professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, is the author of *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Harvard UP, 2003) and a coeditor of *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies* (Columbia UP, 2004) and of the journal *Social Text*. He is working on two book projects: a study of the interplay between jazz and literature in African American culture and a cultural history of the avant-garde “loft jazz” scene in downtown New York in the 1970s.

MARJORIE PERLOFF’S 2006 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS MAY BE MOST STRIKING IN ITS CALL FOR A RETURN TO A CONVENTIONAL DEFINITION

of the literary as the ground of disciplinary training. If the profession of literary study in the contemporary academy is in a state of crisis, Perloff argues, it is largely a result of the ways literary scholars have undermined and contaminated the core of the discipline, adopting a “governing paradigm” for scholarship and teaching from other fields, including anthropology and history (654). “It is time to trust the literary instinct that brought us to this field in the first place,” she counsels, “and to recognize that, instead of lusting after those other disciplines that seem so exotic primarily because we don’t really practice them, what we need is more theoretical, historical, and critical training in our own discipline” (662). One could respond that this position, with its suggestion that the solution is mostly a matter of self-fashioning in the discipline, understates the broader pressures in the university as a social institution. But in what follows I would like to take up a different, smaller concern: Perloff’s hostility to interdisciplinarity.

One might begin with Perloff’s seemingly innocuous question “Why is the ‘merely’ literary so suspect today?” (655). This phrase is interesting because it consolidates the literary not with an invocation of autonomy and transcendence—that is, through the sort of framing habitually associated with the New Criticism—but with a more tentative gesture that seems to pull back from or question (with its quotation marks) the very purity it asserts. In philosophy, this rhetorical gesture is perhaps most immediately associated with Kant, who habitually makes recourse to restrictive modifiers like *bloss* (“mere” or “merely”), *nur* (“only”), and *lediglich* (“simply”), not only in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) but throughout his work. Rodolph Gasché has noted the pivotal role of such terms in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where Kant uses them systematically in his discussion of “mere” reflection in aesthetic judgment to indicate “the difficulty of isolating, with the required purity, the realm to be delimited” (Gasché 19). Yet Kant’s *bloss* seems

different from Perloff's "mere," not least because etymologically the German term indicates a "privation, in contrast to a prior and customary sense of possession, protection, or endowment," whereas the English word derives from the Latin *merus*, meaning "pure" or "unmixed" (21–22). Kant uses the qualifier to highlight the uncertain boundaries between the kinds of judgment—in other words, reflective judgment comes into view "only in relation, and in opposition, to the understanding" (41)—but Perloff uses "merely" to suggest that the literary, even if threatened or "suspect," can nevertheless be considered in isolation, as the core of a disciplinary practice.¹

Given Perloff's insistence on the importance of critical reading in her definition of literary scholarship, it is surprising that she employs one of the notorious habits of journalists covering the MLA convention every December: using the working titles of scholarly projects to make general remarks about the state of the discipline. Among Perloff's cursory list of then-current fellowship projects at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina is Catherine Cole's "Stages of Transition: Performing South Africa's Truth Commission." Without naming Cole, Perloff says dismissively:

True, the South African Truth Commission may be better understood when we examine its workings as a form of theater. . . . But in these and related cases, the literary, if it matters at all, is always secondary; it has at best an instrumental value. Accordingly, it would be more accurate to call the predominant activity of contemporary literary scholars *other-disciplinary* rather than interdisciplinary. (655)

I see no reason to make an example of Cole—or, to be precise, Cole's title, since Perloff does not discuss her scholarship or its place in the field of performance studies (which it may be a mistake to conflate with literary scholarship). However, as a number of scholars have pointed

out, the literary is by no means "secondary" or "instrumental" to the working of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). On the contrary, questions about the formal status and authority of literary genres such as autobiography, fiction, and testimony are central to the history of this singular and influential social arena (e.g., Sanders). In the wake of the TRC, there has been a good deal of commentary in South Africa regarding the political and allegorical implications of literature. One famous and controversial instance is the public statement given in April 2000 by the African National Congress (ANC) to the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media, in which the ANC offers a reading of J. M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* (see also Jolly 148–50). Coetzee's novel, according to the ANC, "makes the point that, five years after our liberation, white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African," and the novel is marshaled as "proof" that pervasive racism remains among journalists in South Africa. Isn't the consideration of these issues—concerning the political uses by the ANC of what can only be called literary criticism—a matter of "attending to language in all of its material density," in Terry Eagleton's phrase (qtd. in Perloff 658)? This consideration is clearly relevant to Perloff's list of "basic literary questions"; that is, the TRC is precisely the sort of arena in which a literary scholar should ask, "What is the relation of truth to fiction?" (660). Indeed, only through the literary can one account for the political function of the commission and its prospects for fostering reconciliation through the public performance of narrative testimony.

At another point, Perloff reiterates her argument against the instrumental use of literature for the purposes of other disciplines by writing:

If poetry is the supreme fiction, or, in Ezra Pound's more practical terms, "[n]ews that STAYS news," then the study of literature

cannot assign to the texts in question a merely instrumental value. As Adorno put it, “The greatness of works of art . . . consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides.” (658; ellipsis in orig.)

The citation from Theodor Adorno’s well-known radio lecture “On Lyric Poetry and Society” is jarring, given that his piece is a forceful argument for what Adorno terms the “social interpretation of lyric poetry” (“gesellschaftliche Deutung von Lyrik”; 38; “Rede” 51) rather than for the dissociation of art from society. As Adorno explains succinctly, his “thesis is that the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism” (45). He defines ideology as “untruth, false consciousness, deceit,” and thus the point of the sentence Perloff cites is that great poetry “moves beyond false consciousness” (39). The reading of poetry might be called instrumental here in that the task of the critic is to “discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art” (39). But it cannot be called merely instrumental, because Adorno is concerned with the specificity of the literary as a mode that indexes the social precisely in terms of its distance from society.

Whereas Perloff champions the “merely literary,” she invokes the “merely instrumental” with disdain, as though any effort to “inquire concretely” into poetry’s “social content,” as Adorno recommends (38), would result in a distinctly sociological or historical inquiry residing by definition outside literature. And yet in this essay Adorno argues that literature—even the supposedly rarified realm of poetry—must be understood to be a privileged site of political contestation and identity formation. He contends that “poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege,” since

the pressures of the struggle for survival allow only a few human beings to grasp the universal through immersion in the self or to develop as autonomous subjects capable

of freely expressing themselves. The others, however, those who not only stand alienated, as though they were objects, facing the disconcerted poetic subject but who have also literally been degraded to objects of history, have the same right, or a greater right, to grope for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded. This inalienable right has asserted itself again and again, in forms however impure, mutilated, fragmentary, and intermittent—the only forms possible for those who have to bear the burden. (45)

This passage defies the reader who is tempted to dismiss Adorno’s work for its elitist tendencies. Indeed, these sentences might be taken as a point of entry into a consideration of the unique experimental character of postcolonial poetics. As Jahan Ramazani has pointed out, although there is an enormous scholarly conversation around the postcolonial condition, the most prominent theories of the relations between literature and nationalism have emphasized fictional narrative as integral to the imagining of community, ignoring poetry almost completely (*Hybrid Muse* 1–5; see also Edwards, “Genres”). There is now substantial work on individual poets such as Derek Walcott and strong scholarship on the dynamics of vernacular, creole, and bilingual poetics in particular contexts, especially in the Caribbean. Simon Gikandi, Ramazani (“Contemporary Postcolonial Poetry”), and Eric Keenaghan independently note that scholars have likewise begun discussing how postcolonial literature appropriates and diverges from European modernist literature; many of the scholars who investigate this relation focus on poetry to elucidate the dynamics of “cross-cultural poetics” or the “poetics of relation” (Harris; Glissant, *Poetics*; see also Chaudhuri; De; Gosciak; Howes; Marx; Pollard). Still, only a handful of scholars have begun to theorize the relation between postcoloniality and poetics in a broader sense. The few overviews or comparative case studies of postcolonial poetics that have emerged in the past decade

have been almost all anglophone (Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*; Patke; Mohanram and Rajan), and there remains a dearth of work on literature in the indigenous languages of the global South.

Rather than a return to the “merely” literary, I hope to see a proliferation of interdisciplinary approaches to poetry. In postcolonial literary criticism, these would necessarily include an attention to what Adorno terms the “collective undercurrent” (“kollektiven unterstrom”; 46; 60) of poetry in all its material density—whether in, say, Édouard Glissant’s brilliant readings of the proto-creole poetics of homemade bumper stickers in Martinique (“Poetics” 163–65); or in Kirsten Silva Gruesz’s history of the transnational circuits of poetry and criticism that formed the roots of Latino literary culture in the Americas; or in Anthony Soares’s unravelings of the charged relations between Tetum and Portuguese in contemporary poetry in East Timor; or in Kelwyn Sole’s excavation of a poetics of the everyday in postapartheid South Africa. In whatever form, literary criticism must not relinquish its unique point of articulation with the social.

I would like to give the remainder of my space here to a translation of a speech that the Martinican poet Monchoachi made in 2003 on accepting the Prix Max Jacob, which he was awarded for his book *L’espère-geste*. It is suggestive to read Monchoachi’s speech in juxtaposition to Perloff’s, at once for his “social interpretation” of the role of poetry, his different call for a “return,” and his implicit departure from some of her framing gestures, perhaps above all her turn to Greek sources as foundations of the discipline of poetics. As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, Monchoachi is one of the more remarkable poets to emerge from the *créolité* movement in the French Caribbean (“Introduction”). Whereas the *créolité* novelists, including Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant, have explored the possibilities of liter-

ary Creole as well as strategies of creolizing French (in fictions unfurled as dense archival palimpsests where French is irrigated or imploded with Creole syntax and vocabulary), Monchoachi might be said to forge a poetics of the border between French and Creole. Though he has published books in Creole and in French, his most extraordinary work may be his book-length serial poems, *Mantèg* (1980) and *Noström* (1982), which are framed as self-translations: each proceeds in the two tongues at once, Creole on the left side of the page, French on the right.

In reading Monchoachi’s call for a “restorative” poetics in the face of globalization and “linguistic barbarism,” can we overlook the fact that the pseudonym this author employs is the name of an infamous Maroon who led a violent insurrection against French slavery in Martinique? Is it significant that the poet studied philosophy at Bordeaux, or that he was active in the student movement in the late 1960s in France and subsequently in political organizing in Martinique? I include Monchoachi’s words here not only to point out that we should attend to the ways that writers have responded to the supposed contemporary crisis or looming eclipse of literature but also to note that—at least in the field most resonant for my scholarship, comparative literature of the African diaspora—many of the literary scholars are poets (Glissant, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Nathaniel Mackey, Harryette Mullen, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Fred Moten, and Aldon Nielsen, among others). I also include his allusive remarks to raise the question of the place of comparative work in the discipline of literary study, and to point—by translating—to the field of translation studies as one of the most vibrant areas of literary study today. To return to the opening pages of Perloff’s address, it is perhaps worth noting that Monchoachi has translated into Creole two of Samuel Beckett’s plays, *Fin de partie* (*Jé-a bout*) and *En attendant Godot* (*La ka èspéré Godot*).

SPEECH ON THE RECEPTION OF THE PRIX MAX
JACOB (2003)*Monchoachi*

One can with good reason, in the current times, wonder what founds and legitimates the making of poetry. Every day everyone has in mind the famous interpellation that Hölderlin, in the elegy “Bread and Wine,” somewhat distraught, addresses to himself: “what to do or to say in the meantime / I don’t know, and who wants poets at all in lean years? [*und wozu Dichter in dürtiger Zeit?*]” (326–27).² Not that poets are obliged to maintain a particular commerce with the affairs of the world, at least in what concerns the decision of peace and war, but certainly they must do so with regard to linguistic barbarism [*la barbarie langagière*], which is the way of the world, which impregnates it and properly imprints it, and which anticipates and escorts all barbarism. To a disciple who asks him, “Master, were the Lord of Wey to turn the administration of his state over to you, what would be your first priority?” Confucius replies, “Before all else, it would be necessary to restore language.”³ And Max Jacob, correcting Buffon’s contention that “style makes the man,” expresses himself in this fashion: “What is the man is his way of using words” [*Ce qui est l’homme même, c’est son langage* (19)] (5). Whatever the outcome, let us leave Master Kong to his affairs, and precious hold on to the phrase “before all else, it would be necessary to restore language.”

How can and should one understand it [*l’entendre*]? In other words, how should we open ourselves to listening to this expression [*cette parole*]? There is a Creole proverb that, translated, gives the following: “the first word is the mother of listening” [*la première parole est la mère de l’écoute*]. What the proverb names “the first word” is clearly signified to us: it is called “first” in that it brings listening to light and in that it nourishes listening. In addition, “the first word” supposes that

there has followed a “second word” or, more precisely, a manner of speaking [*manière de parole*] characterized by not opening onto listening, not nourishing listening—a language [*langage*] separated from listening in such a way that it thereby becomes a simple means of expression, an instrumentalized language. But the “first word” says something else, too, something else confided to us in the precious phrase of Master Kong.

The phrase begins with the words “before all else” [*avant tout*], which one must be careful to understand not with a listening that is saturated but instead in the same bright clearing as Hölderlin, speaking of “those who long ago named the All and the One.”⁴ “Before all else” is before everything, before the “first word” names the All and the One, establishes and gives out a world. The “first word” establishes and gives out a world; each first word establishes and gives out a world. In consequence, that it is necessary “to restore language” cannot be understood as a simple operation of restoration [*ravalement*], like a simple grooming: in the strong sense, “to restore language” is to reestablish language, to make a return to the “first word,” which brings listening to light and nourishes it and which gives out a world.

Bizarrely and paradoxically, the era of globalization [*mondialisation*] is plunging us into a space deserted of world [*déserté de monde*]. As the techniques of information and communication develop, the world “shrinks,” to use Rilke’s word. I mean that such shrinking should be attributed not to technique but to the manner in which it is employed. This is what I mean, but I am not at all sure of it. The gods fled at the very instant when man took up the idea to consider the world as an object to subjugate and no longer as his house, peopled by his spirits and his gods. Is there a more abominable mockery, a more terrible contempt, in the modern Western world than that of considering ancient Greece as the cradle of its civilization,

when Greece constitutes at the best a divine parenthesis, indeed a breakaway [*une échappée*], indeed even, and from its own point of view, a divergence or an incongruity?

The separation against the world had been carried out long before, and it would not be long before it took up its course again. The history of the earth as a space deserted of world is a long history of which “globalization” constitutes, perhaps, only an epilogue not devoid of bitter irony. Yet, with regard to man, the separation against the world could only operate, could only become effective, in the exact degree that it proceeded from the separation against the “first word,” precisely that which establishes and gives out a world, in the exact degree that it proceeded from the separation against everything by which the word is a word open to the listening of the world, against everything by which the word is attached to the world—that is, against the body, which was from that moment on reduced to its physiological dimension and then, like every object, converted into merchandise.

The “first word” is the word that the poet attempts to restore in a universe deafened by the din of massive destruction, all the languages [*langages*] relentless in their desertifying of the world. The “first word” is quite simply the word. And the poet a warrior, the greatest of warriors, because—to take up the words of Celan, words of a burning timeliness—“exposed in that previously unforeseen sense, and thereby frighteningly in the open [*auf das unheimlichste im Freien*], the poet goes to language with his entire being, sore with reality and seeking reality.”⁵

NOTES

1. One can gain a sense of this difference by comparing Perloff’s discussion of the literary to sentences in Kant such as the following, which employs a repeated “merely” to demonstrate that the aesthetic “play” of reflection (in poetry) cannot be entirely separated from the cognitive

operations of the understanding: “The poet announces merely an entertaining play with ideas, and yet as much results for the understanding as if he had merely had the intention of carrying on its business” (198).

2. I have supplied all the sources for the quotations in Monchoachi’s text and provided bracketed phrases from the originals when appropriate.

3. Ames and Rosemont offer a somewhat different rendition of the last sentence in the original Chinese: “Without question it would be to insure that names are used properly (*zhengming*)” (162). I have modified this sentence in order to remain as close as possible to the French translation given by Monchoachi: “Avant tout, il faudrait restaurer le langage” (102).

4. I have modified this phrase to retain the sense of the French translation used by Monchoachi (“ceux-là qui jadis ont nommé le Tout et l’Un”), although the syntax and semantic ambiguity of the German original may be more accurately translated by Hamburger: “One and All long ago, once and for all, they were named” (“schon längst Eines und Alles genannt”; 322–23).

5. I have translated this passage from the German original (186).

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