Introduction: Some Pre$_{sup}$positions

BRUCE R. SMITH

"ON POETRY": THAT'S WHAT THE 2001–02 EDITORIAL BOARD determined this special topic in *PMLA* would be.[1] At issue, you might suppose, is poetry. But we know already what poetry is. No problem there. It's *poesis*—a making, a made thing.[2] If we accept Aristotle's definition, it's specifically a thing made out of speech and rhythm (16). We might press the matter further and agree with the Russian formalists that it's a thing made out of speech and rhythm that calls attention to its making and its made-ness. Really at issue here is not poetry. It's *on*.

The 2002 call for papers suggested that what needs attending to just now is something outside poetry, apart from it: "Although many psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories are grounded in poetic discourse, critics who invoke these paradigms have seemed reluctant to take poems as objects of analysis. Has the time come to revisit the relevance of poetry and the pleasures of the poetic text in this changed interpretive universe?" One hundred twenty-nine MLA members thought so. The number of submissions was the largest ever received for a special topic in *PMLA*. The Editorial Board may not have noticed at the time, but there was a ghost in the room when the description was being formulated, and his name was Jacques Derrida. Actually, his was the ghost in the machine, too, since the fine-tuning of the description happened digitally, one on-off signal at a time, over e-mail. Let's line up the binaries that have brought us to this pass:

1/0

poetry/theory

pleasure/critique

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There may have been a second ghost in the transaction, this one named John Keats:

beauty/truth

If we find ourselves at an impasse here, several reasons suggest themselves. First, the conceptual categories favored in contemporary theory—material conditions, race, gender, class, ethnicity—seem to have a more oblique relation to verse than they do to novels, films, and plays. The latter genres, in the eyes of many critics, bear a stronger mimetic relation with social reality. Second, contemporary poetry, even in its most abstract forms—sound poetry, for example—is identified by most readers with the individual consciousness of the poet. After the death of the author and the death of the subject, poetry would appear to be a troubling if not downright embarrassing anachronism. Finally, there is academic culture itself. The structure of English departments usually assumes a distinction between creative writing and theory. Sometimes the division is tripartite: creative writing, literature, theory. Since many poets today depend on appointments in departments of English for their sustenance, these divisions have a practical, day-by-day, lived significance. With the added distraction of teaching students which prepositions go with which verbs, many modern language departments suffer their own divisions between those who do theory and those who don't.

Perhaps, though, the impasse is only an illusion, an effect of shortsightedness amid straitened circumstances. Critique *is* pleasure, Roland Barthes insisted. Perhaps, too, theory is poetry of a sort. All the dominant critical methodologies of the twentieth century—psychoanalytic theory, Marxism in its western European varieties, new historicism, and deconstruction—began in engagements with poetry. To Sigmund Freud, dreams present the same metaphoric displacements and metonymic elisions that poems do. Although Freud felt most comfortable in dealing with drama, he was worried enough about his indebtedness to poetry that he suppressed, if not repressed, until 1930 the source of his fundamental proposition that "hunger and love are what move the world." The line comes from Friedrich von Schiller's poem "Die Weltreisen" (Frankland 39–40). For Jacques Lacan, poetry provides a particularly telling instance of how the signifier (S) always exceeds the signified (*s*). In "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious; or, Reason since Freud" (1957), Lacan invokes Ferdinand de Saussure's image of a "chain of signifiers" as a way of visualizing why the bar in S/*s* remains intransible. But there's a *but*:

> But one has only to listen to poetry . . . for a polyphony to be heard, for it to become clear that all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score.
>
> There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended "vertically," as it were, from that point. (154)

And to demonstrate what he means he turns to Paul Valéry's poem "Au platane." Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973) takes seriously George Crabbe's claim that poetry can tell the truth about economic and social realities: "No longer truth, though shown in verse, disdain, / But own the Village Life a life of pain" (qtd. in Williams, *Country* 11). Williams proves Crabbe right by demonstrating how pastoral poetry and country-house poems mediate material conditions through "structures of feeling" (*Country* 11–34; *Marxism* 128–35). As models for new historicism, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt cite not only the "thick description" in Clifford Geertz's anthropology but the meticulous close reading in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Auerbach set a standard of startlingly fresh interpretations, they say, "because his analyses have the kind of inten-

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sity and detail more typically associated with readings of Shakespeare sonnets or Donne lyrics, and because the fragmentary passages he chooses to analyze seem to represent not only whole works but whole ages" (37). Poems by John Ashbery, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth provide occasion for the dialogue among Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979), a book that can be credited with putting deconstruction on the map in American universities. "Deconstructive criticism does not present itself as a novel enterprise," Hartman insists in the preface. "There is, perhaps, more of a relentless focus on certain questions, and a new rigor when it comes to the discipline of close reading. Yet to suggest that meaning and language do not coincide, and to draw from that noncoincidence a peculiar strength, is merely to restate what literature has always revealed" (viii).

Still, there is the problem of *on*. If we really want to know how we know what we know, we should forget nouns, forget verbs. The syntactic unit that best captures the situation of the knowing subject, Michel Serres claims, is the preposition (*Angels* 195; *Troubadour* 143–44). Serres advocates a relational way of knowing. Prepositions, literally, prepose the body. They *position* it *before*, both temporally and spatially. They implicate the body in ways of knowing the world that are more complicated, more nuanced, than the subject-object binary implicit in nouns, in the act of naming. "Weaving space, constructing time, they are the precursors," Serres says, "of every presence" (*Angels* 146). (Suppositions, by contrast, *pose* something *below*, adding a subtext that potentially distracts.) *On* articulates the conditions for a certain kind of knowledge. Derrida, in his contribution to *Deconstruction and Criticism*, seizes on the title of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* and won't let go until he has put the very possibility of commentary and translation on the skids. As if in answer to Shelley's poem, Derrida's "Living On" begins with a *but*:

> But who's talking about living?
> In other words on living?

The effect of that mobile *on* is to ensure that what came first does not live on in what comes second:

> This time, "in other words" does not put the same thing into other words, does not clarify an ambiguous expression, does not function like an "i.e." It amasses the powers of indecision and adds to the foregoing utterance its capacity for skidding. Under the pretext of commenting upon a terribly indeterminate, shifting statement, a statement difficult to pin down [*arrêter*], it gives a reading or version of it that is all the less satisfactory, controllable, unequivocal, for being more "powerful" than what it comments upon or translates.
>
> (75; interpolation in orig.)

Derrida goes on to consider versions of *upon*—the Latin *de*, the French *de*, the English *of*—as well as kinetic ideas of translation in the *across* of Latin *trans* + *latio* and the *above* of German *Über* + *setzung* (76).

In English, at least, the preposition *on* spatializes two quite different ways of knowing. One is intransitive. It involves being outside something and probably above it or on top of it (*OED,* "On, *Prep*.," defs. 1.1–13). Before you picked this journal up, it lay *on* your desk. In Old English, this sense of *on* was followed by nouns in the dative case. The other situation with *on* is transitive. It involves motion or direction toward a position (*OED* "On, *Prep*.," defs. 2.14–22). You stop at a passage in a text and reflect *on* it; you decide the passage bears *on* your interests; you attend a conference *on* a topic; you rise and make a comment *on* that topic; you act *on* your knowledge. "We are such stuff / As dreams are made *on*" (*Tempest* 4.1.156–57; emphasis added). In Old

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English, this second version of *on* took the accusative case—which is, in relation to dreams, the effective position of the ostensibly nominative "we" in Prospero's speech. At bottom, theory would seem to engage the intransitive sense of *on*. *Theōria* in Greek and Latin is related to *theater*: *theōria* involves looking *at* something, speculating *about* it, being *outside* it, being *above* it. In Greek, *theōria* could also be what you saw from that detached vantage point—a usage that has made it into English at least once, in Lancelot Andrewes's 1631 sermon on the passion of Christ (*OED*, "Theory[1]," def. 1). Being *opposite* something would seem, from this evidence, to be a requirement for theory and for theorizing. In ancient Athens, a theor was someone sent out from the city to perform a religious rite or carry out a religious duty (*OED*, "Theory[2]"). A theor was, for the purposes of the mission, an outsider. The theors in this special topic in *PMLA* are, by contrast, movers *toward*. The *on* in "On Poetry" is transitive.

Aside from the problem of how theory can be related to poetry and poetry to theory, no grand design governed the coming together of this special topic. The 129 submissions went through the usual anonymous review process at *PMLA*, each first read by specialists in the author's field. Articles that emerged from this round of reviewing were considered by two different editorial boards, in 2002–03 and 2003–04. The diversity of these initial readers ensured a diversity in the articles that now await your perusal. The collection is bookended by two commissioned essays. I asked Avital Ronell to write something on "theory toward poetry" and Susan Stewart something on "poetry toward theory." (OK, so I did have that much of a program in view, a spatial conception of the relation between theory and poetry.) Each of these writers chose to take up the larger issues by meditating on a single poem: Ronell (through Martin Heidegger) on Friedrich Hölderlin's "Andenken" and Stewart on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode." The resonances in each essay range far beyond the chosen text. Appropriately enough for its inaugural position, Ronell's essay holds out a greeting. "Geh aber nun und grüße" ("But now go and greet"): Heidegger finds in Hölderlin's invitation a frame of mind in which thought can encounter the poem, the human the divine, the citizen the refugee, the self the other, the past the future. Greeting becomes, in Ronell's argument, a "thinking-toward" that transcends 1/0. As Ronell opens the issue with a greeting, Susan Stewart closes it with praise—and a preposition. "What Praise Poems Are For" begins, like Ronell's essay, with a nineteenth-century poem and arrives at no less liberating conclusions. The ode's fixed structure of strophe, antistrophe, and epode would seem to offer a perfect example of "poetry toward theory," of poetry operating as a form of thought. Stewart asks what kinds of knowledge poems make possible—praise poems in particular. Where René Descartes states confidently, once and for all, "I think, therefore I am," Coleridge keeps asking a question: "How can I know I am alive?" The answer, Stewart proposes, is to be found in the specific kind of knowledge achieved in poetry, knowledge that comes about through the body as "a somatic entity that is both part of the world and perceiver of the world."

Between these two essays, you'll encounter variety not only in subjects and historical periods but in approaches and styles. In addition to critical essays on particular poems and authors, the contributions include a genealogy (Daniel Tiffany's "Fugitive Lyric: The Rhymes of the Canting Crew"), a documentary history (Lucy McDiarmid's "A Box for Wilfrid Blunt"), a pedagogical project (Carrie Noland's "Phonic Matters"), a first-person narrative (Virginie Greene's "Three Approaches to Poetry"), and a transcript of the roundtable "Poetry and Theory" held at

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the MLA annual meeting in December 2003. The common concerns that emerge amid this diversity have suggested the order in which the contributions appear.

Three issues in Ronell's essay—the vexed place of "poetry" in relation to "thought," poetry's capacity to embrace the stranger, the mourning that attends separation—are taken up in the next four essays. Joseph Campana's piece, "On Not Defending Poetry," finds the anxieties in Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* to have a prehistory going back at least to Plato and an afterlife extending to recent exchanges among M. H. Abrams, Margaret Ferguson, and Dana Gioia. Campana contrasts Sidney's emphasis on poesy's *enargeia*, its moral and visual clarity, with Edmund Spenser's cultivation of poetry's *energeia*, or vitality, specifically its capacity for engaging the bodily experiences of suffering and sympathy. The focus on the refugee in Ronell's essay and on suffering in Campana's argument finds modern counterparts in R. Clifton Spargo's "The Ethical Uselessness of Grief: Randall Jarrell's 'The Refugees.'" But the suffering this time points up an ethical dilemma involved in mourning the deaths of others. A supposed victim of the bombing of Hiroshima provides Eric Hayot with a case for investigating questions of authority, authenticity, and ethics in "The Strange Case of Araki Yasusada." The desire of contemporary readers for an authentic "poetry of witness" sorts oddly with the death of the author at the hands of contemporary theorists. Perhaps, Hayot suggests, "the author" is best thought of as "a construct that exists not before the poetry but through or even against it." Daniel Tiffany's celebration of riddles, cant, slang, jargon, song, secrecy, Sirens, and birdsong raises questions not only about authority (the verses Tiffany considers in "Fugitive Lyric: The Rhymes of the Canting Crew" are largely by "Anon") but about community and communicability as well. With its attention to sound and social function, Tiffany's essay pursues "an erotics of social anonymity."

In the middle of the issue, you'll find, not a solitary writer presenting a unified argument, but a roomful of people talking. The transcript of excerpts from the MLA roundtable "Poetry and Theory" demonstrates that, if there is a center on which all the vectors here converge, it is an open space. Concerns about pedagogy that emerged in the course of that conversation are addressed in Carrie Noland's "Phonic Matters." Responding to the fact that French theory draws more students at her university than French poetry does, Noland describes how she teaches poetry "not through but beside theory," setting, for example, a vinyl recording of the sound poet Bernard Heidsieck's *Canal Street* alongside Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*. The technology that made it possible for Heidsieck to overlap tracks and intermix recorded sound with live sound has a visual analogue in the possibilities for poetry opened up by motion pictures. In "Mallarmé's Cinepoetics," Christophe Wall-Romana argues that the emerging technology of cinema provided Stéphane Mallarmé a "principle of integration as 'déroulement'—unfolding, uncoiling, unreeling, or unscrolling. . . ." That principle, Wall-Romana shows, became a distinctive practice in modernism.

Ronell in the first essay surmises that "poetry is felt not to have enough muscle tone for scholars concerned with social justice." Any such doubts are put to rest in Ronell's focus on Hölderlin's brown-skinned women, in Spargo's linking of Jarrell's refugees to an economy of feeling in which the alien must always be excluded, in Hayot's highlighting the need to believe in witness poetry, in Tiffany's insistence that vernacular poetry has often been the work of thieves, rogues, and vagabonds. The final group of articles demonstrates, in varied ways, the social functions of poetry. Catherine Robson's "Standing

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on the Burning Deck: Poetry, Performance, History" takes Felicia Hemans's 1826 poem "Casabianca" as an exemplary case of how memorization exercises in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century schools synchronized iambic rhythms with students' heartbeats. Those exercises gave Hemans's poem a body-felt urgency that has been lost, now that students no longer learn poems "by heart." Robson offers, in effect, a social history of meter. In "A Box for Wilfrid Blunt," Lucy McDiarmid assembles a wide range of evidence—photographs, newspaper articles, diary entries, letters, and poems—to reconstruct the "peacock dinner" that W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, T. Sturge Moore, F. S. Flint, and Victor Plarr arranged in 1914 to honor Wilfrid Blunt, a figure of the prior generation whose public image combined anti-imperialism, poetry writing, and a history of at least thirty-eight love affairs. The dinner, in McDiarmid's analysis, "took place in many histories, erotic, literary, and political." Michael Clune aligns idiosyncratic personal choices in Frank O'Hara's poems with the principle of personal choice as the liberal ideal in 1950s America. "'Everything We Want': Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Free Choice" turns the liberal ideal on its head, however, as Clune demonstrates how personal choices in O'Hara's poems take place in a geographic and commercial environment that inserts the individual into a common life. Homology between poetry and social formations is likewise the structural principle in Eric Walker's essay, "The Muse of Indifference." The controversy in America over gay and lesbian marriage becomes, in Walker's analysis, not a sign of liberal breakthrough but testimony to the hegemony of "marriage culture." So strong is the imperative to marry that there is not even a poetic term to set against "epithalamic." In women's poetry of the late eighteenth century and in F. W. J. von Schelling's philosophical writings, Walker locates the term he needs, "indifference," and he uses it to single out the ways in which Marianne Moore and Anne Carson resist the seemingly inevitable pairing off of poetry and marriage. The segue to Susan Stewart's concluding essay on poetry toward theory is provided by something unusual in my experience of *PMLA*: a first-person narrative. In "Three Approaches to Poetry," Virginie Greene in effect accepts Ronell's invitation to greet poetry as she reflects on encounters in three environments: a used-book store, a subway train, and a research library. To read a poem along with Greene is to feel one's way through shifting and unsettling relations between the reading subject and the poem-object.

Refugees, mourning, the indirections of "poetry" versus the teleological directedness of "thought," birdsong, homologies between *poesis* and social function, sound, the sentient body, poetry's appropriations of technology, and, yes, prepositions: these are some of the motives that keep coming up in, between, and among these fourteen pieces. You may be tempted to go straight to the essays that address authors you teach or the chronological period you specialize in. If you do, you'll miss the *toward* dynamic of these writings "on poetry." Something's afoot here. That *a-*, by the way, is an *on* (*OED*, "On, *Prep.*," def. 4.30; "A, *Prep.*[1]," def. 1).

Notes

[1] Carlos J. Alonso was the editor of *PMLA* in 2001–02. The Editorial Board consisted of R. Howard Bloch, Joseph A. Boone, Jay Fliegelman, Avital Ronell, Mireille Rosello, and Bruce R. Smith.

[2] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989, "Poesy, *Sb. Arch.*" Future references to the *OED* are cited in the text.

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