Poetry, Scholarship, and Teaching Composition

To the Editor:

Right at the beginning of the excellent special topic on poetry, I found myself distracted by this unintentionally hilarious passage:

> 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. (Bruce R. Smith, "Introduction: Some Pre$_{sup}$positions," 120 [2005]: 10)

Anybody who works in an English department and thinks that the trio "creative writing, literature, theory" is the division with the most "practical, day-by-day, lived significance" has had a career of truly princely privilege. That erasure, that fantastically extravagant obliviousness to the overwhelming bulk of the work that happens in English departments, colored my reading of the rest of the issue. (Bruce R. Smith, the coordinator of the special topic, at least has the grace to acknowledge the real division of labor in modern language departments, offering a nod to basic language instruction—the least prestigious and generally most miserably remunerated but by far the largest portion of the work in those departments. *Merci*.)

So as I read, the eight-hundred-pound gorilla who crowds out most everything else in my office sat atop my desk and chuckled, especially at the work of those contributors with prestigious professorships. This is not to suggest that all the contributors are necessarily unacquainted with my gorilla friend—only Smith, after all, makes a point of calling attention to his own willful blindness, his indifference to academic labor below a particular standard of prestige. But the gorilla would occasionally nudge me, count the pages of critical and theoretical argument, then urge me to calculate the hours and hours of composition grading by graduate students, part-timers, temps, and other adjuncts in the critics' departments that made possible those fine disquisitions. The princes have the necessary time and leisure for their intellectual work (which I am not knocking!) because the peasants don't get paid much. The gorilla finds those spectacular ratios amusing.

This semester, at my community college job, four of my five classes are composition. Critical and creative writing must wait until summer. Even this letter: I have time to write it because it is now spring break. Smith's remark, written with all the innocent ignorance of unthought privilege, made me aware that for those of us at the lower tiers of the profession, including those of us with PhDs, *PMLA* fulfills almost the same function as *Martha Stewart Living*: great ideas there, but mostly we get from it the wonderful fantasy of ever having the time to do such things ourselves.

The eight-hundred-pound gorilla sits on my desk every day. He sits on the desks of the princes, too—they couldn't do their work without him. Some of the princes don't see him. And he doesn't always find it so amusing that such a large fellow can be so easily dismissed and forgotten.

James D. Sullivan
Illinois Central College

Reply:

The anger that James D. Sullivan expresses over disparities in working conditions in the profession of English is altogether justified. The causes for these disparities, it seems to me, have less to do with the editorial policies of *PMLA* and the supposed myopia of professors in research universities than with a capitalist system that hierarchizes institutions of higher learning in this country, apportions salaries and course loads in direct relation to tuition charges, and divides educators among themselves so as to forestall any unified confrontation with the system. I apologize for unintentionally offending Sullivan and anyone else who has to work in such demoralizing circumstances.

Sullivan's letter makes me regret that the special topic of *PMLA* didn't include more contribu-

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tions on poetry and pedagogy, particularly since poetry offers a way of bridging the gap between composition on one side of Sullivan's divide and literature, theory, and creative writing on the other. Actually, it was construction work on this kind of bridge that led to my being asked to coordinate "On Poetry." For the past ten years I've convened a course called Reading, Teaching (and Enjoying) Poetry, in Middlebury College's Bread Loaf MA program. The course explores ways that the middle school and high school teachers enrolled in the program can combine poetry, creative body movement, and nonlinear writing projects with the composition work usually expected in English classes. Participants in the Bread Loaf course have come from rural schools in the Southeast as well as New England prep schools, from urban school districts like Newark and New Orleans as well as remote schools in the Navajo Nation. Teachers from the least privileged schools as well as from elite schools have reported the same results: approaching poetry in this way can free up students who are not good at "composition" and give them skills and confidence that turn out to be useful in more-traditional writing tasks. My attempt to put these ideas into action has been a succession of first-year core courses at Georgetown and the University of Southern California on poetry, body, and self.

No simple solution is going to make the divisions that Sullivan describes any easier to live with. Poetry, however, doesn't have to stay on the literature–theory–creative-writing side of the divide.

Bruce R. Smith
University of Southern California

Araki Yasusada: Authorship and Aesthetic Expression

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to Eric R. J. Hayot's "The Strange Case of Araki Yasusada: Author, Object" (120 [2005]: 66–81). Since I am the editor and executor of *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada*, I hope you will allow me to make an important clarification.

Overall, I think Hayot's essay is superb, one of the most original and complex discussions of Yasusada to date: his fascinating consideration of the writing's "aesthetic relations to objects" (76) opens up a unique perspective on the work, and his close reading of two of the poems in *Doubled Flowering* adds up to an analytical tour de force, to say the least. All in all, it is a rich, challenging piece, and I am grateful, as the work's caretaker, for his terrific critical effort.

However, something Hayot asserts toward the opening of his essay is, I'm afraid, potentially misleading in a significant way. After summarizing a few of the many early responses to *Doubled Flowering*, he writes: "At the far end of these reactions stood Johnson, declaring that authorship itself is a kind of hoax, a trick played by bourgeois notions of property and propriety, the reverence for experience and witnessing being a symptom of a prelapsarian attitude toward the text as such" (68). The first point I wish to make is this: while it's true I have actively participated in the debate the work has provoked, and while I've also often remarked on the intriguing ways Tosa Motokiyu's Yasusada texts interface with theory and the politics of poetry, I have also often emphasized that *Doubled Flowering* was not primarily written as some kind of symbolic appeal for the "death of the Author" as against the "hoax" of conventional authorship or for any other poststructuralist notion. Ambiguities of agency, authenticity, ethnicity, and axiology inhabit the work, but these are, along with the ongoing critical commentaries branching out from them, largely incidental aftereffects to the original impetus of the fiction. *Doubled Flowering*, to be sure, prominently contravenes (inasmuch as it gestures toward alternative, more fluid stagings of poetic presentation) long-institutionalized protocols of authorial control and classification that dominate both "traditional" and "experimental" wings of our poetry. But its withdrawal of authorship (for Tosa Motokiyu, as Hayot explains, is the pseudonym of a writer, or writers, who did not wish to claim the work he, she, or they wrote) is rooted in felt ethical imperatives that are of a piece with the work's full aesthetic expression—imperatives that have little to do, again, with theoretical aforethought.

To say this is not to imply there was no self-reflexiveness or metacommentary that entered the work over the stages of its production,

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