Poetry and Theory: A Roundtable

THE QUESTION OF HOW POETRY AND THEORY INTERSECT DREW forty or so people to a session at the MLA annual meeting in San Diego on 29 December 2003. Bruce R. Smith, the convener, had asked three practicing poets who also write criticism (David Gewanter, Roberta Hill, and Mark McMorris) and a specialist in technocultural studies (Douglas Kahn) to join him in each choosing a single poem and using it as a test case for discussing how theory and poetry are related. David Gewanter chose Czeslaw Milosz's "Incantation"; Roberta Hill, Edward Brathwaite's "Negus"; Douglas Kahn, Allen Ginsberg's "Laughing Gas" and "Ether"; Mark McMorris, two passages from Aimé Césaire's Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*; and Bruce Smith, Thomas Nashe's song "Spring." After the five presentations, several members of the audience joined the discussion. Here are excerpts from the proceedings. Short biographies of the speakers can be found at the end.*

Bruce Smith. We're here to test out the hypothesis that the *PMLA* Editorial Board had when they commissioned this special issue on poetry and theory: "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?" I find seven key words—seven key nouns—in this description. Perhaps we can use these as reference points: (1) theories, (2) poetic discourse, (3) paradigms, (4) poems (is poetic discourse the same thing as poems?), (5) analysis, (6) relevance, and (7) pleasures. [On the large number of submissions for this special topic and some possible reasons for the perceived standoff between

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https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poetry and theory, see Bruce Smith's introduction to this issue of *PMLA*.]

David Gewanter. Contemporary theory ably employs poetic discourse—poetic phrases, TV ads, metaphors, cultural patterns, and more. Yet contemporary theory on poems rarely captures or provides the pleasure and surprise of poems themselves. Why is this? Two answers come to mind. The first is that poems are unique cultural objects: they find their own path in the world; they create zones of intense inquiry and surprise, visions, memory, song patterns, inexplicable pleasure. They celebrate and induce dramatic changes of identity, are recited at births, seductions, ceremonies, and funerals. As the poet Eugenio Montale's essay "The Second Life of Art" observes, poems can "complete their existence when they circulate" in culture.

I have a second answer as to why contemporary critical theory is reluctant to draw from poems. It is not so beatific, but rather contentious and debatable. I'll hold it for later, and offer now a parable on how poems can circulate slyly and powerfully beneath the radar of panoptic inspection, until they suddenly rise against it. In my tale, the inspector is not the baleful critical theory but the US government. The series of poems ends with Czeslaw Milosz's "Incantation." The poem's secret weapon? Someone read it out. Someone else heard it, and liked it.

The battleground is the US Library of Congress, which in 1948 awarded the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound for his *Pisan Cantos*. Since Pound was then awaiting trial for treason, an outraged Congress banned the library from giving prizes. But poems were already sabotaging the ban. Around that time, a Texan boy typing index cards at the library wooed a Texan girl working there. He secretly passed her his poems typed on the cards—a strict supervisor watched from a podium—and she wrote poems back. His mother had sold a cow for his train fare to college in Washington. The girl was better off: her brother was Senator Lyndon Baines Johnson, and she was engaged to a senator. In a rare victory of poetry over power, she chose the boy, O. B. Bobbitt, and returned to Texas. Their son, Philip Bobbitt, writes on political science and joined the National Security Council under President Clinton. From these chambers, Bobbitt persuaded Congress to offer a literary prize in honor of his mother, almost forty years after the congressional ban.

The new links of poems turned from there. Because of Bobbitt's interests, I asked him to read in Robert Pinsky's "Favorite Poem" reading at the Library of Congress in April 1999, even as the US and NATO were bombing Kosovo daily. Bobbitt decided on Stevens. I asked if Secretary of Defense William Cohen, himself a poet, would also read a favorite poem, and suggested Milosz's "Incantation." Bobbitt handed it to Cohen at their daily briefing. Cohen liked it, and agreed to read it.

"Incantation," as Seamus Heaney has written, brings a "slight element of the conspiratorial" in that it "did things forbidden" to the modern lyric: it was "full of abstractions" and "unembarrassed didacticism." Heaney, who first heard it read by its translator Pinsky, says the poem "aspired to deliver what we had once long ago been assured it was not any poem's business to deliver: a message."

But messages depend on tone. Below "Incantation"'s pulpit-thumping pronouncements, like "Human reason is beautiful and invincible," one can detect a weary, east European skepticism and irony. My hope was that Cohen would read the poem in unflinching hortatory cadences, to fortify public support for NATO bombing, but that the Washington audience would make a "second life" for the poem, hearing in it a satire on idealism, a tinny echo in a world whose facts deny such abstract Truths.

Well, my fantasy went up in clouds. On April 7th rainstorms in Europe kept the bombers away. NATO members flinched. Co-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hen flew to Europe that afternoon, and never read. When I asked Bobbitt if "Incantation" sounded ironic, he smiled politely.

After this beguiling parable of poems' social power, I'll now offer my second, disputatious guess as to contemporary theory's problem with poems. Theory ceased using poems as evidence when theorists ceased writing the breakthrough poems that are theory's only fully authorized testing ground. Poets' theories are testable in poems. Accordingly, their prose is both more true than a critic's, and more false. Much of Wordsworth's or Eliot's poetics theory, for instance, may be disproven by their poems. Their theories may not employ categories used by some contemporary critical theory, but it would be interesting to consider how theory could take us to a poem's beginning positions. To refit Montale's observation, a poetics theory can only "complete its existence" in a significant poem. What I'm proposing, I guess, is that only compelling poems can make poetics happen.

Roberta Hill. Although poems can be thought of as objects, I also think that language is more than an object. Language is a power. To the words on Bruce's list, I want to add another word, "truth." I'm not speaking of the truth of what factually happened here or there. I'm thinking of emotional truth, the truth of our feelings, the truth that comes to us when you hear some music from some time in your life, and though you may remember the factual experiences that happened, what is deeply affecting you is the feeling that comes through with that music. Each one of us has our music that connects us to a community of some sort.

If native people had not been colonized and suppressed and oppressed and torn asunder, if the connections between native people and the settlers that arrived here were more equitable, then each one of you would have a song. If native cultures were able to share, more deeply than they did, not only democracy but the sense of creative life, then each one of you would have had a song today to sing, and you would be sharing them in the halls, and you would be asking one another, What is your song? And we would hear them, and there would be much more music in the world. But of course that didn't happen. So what we have to think about in terms of poetry is the idea of breath, and the importance of breath, and the importance of music within poetry. Truth comes from the breath and the air and the sense of rhythm that we have, that we are immersed in. What I hear in Edward Brathwaite's "Negus" is . . . I hear a drum. I hear a drum. And not only a drum, but a dance. And not only a dance, but the beats of that music, which is the basic rhythm of the connection between Africa and this continent that we call Turtle Island. I'll just mention a few of the stanzas so we get the poem out into the air.

> It
> it
> it
> it is not
>
> it
> it
> it is not
>
> it is not
> it is not
> it is not enough
> it is not enough to be free . . .

The rhythm of this poem is what really strikes me, because rhythm is what we essentially are as we walk through those hallways. We breathe in rhythms. Our blood beats in rhythms. We are myriad shifting rhythms, traveling together. When we stop having rhythm, then we are dead. So this poem is really a life-force energy coming through the air to each one of us, and helps us to keep going. It's in the rhythm that I find the truth. In the music of the poem, I find its power to awaken emotions. Emotional memory surges through us and through the life that supports us.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Through poetry as language, rhythm, music, we feel our sentient interconnectedness.

The poem also in its implications discusses language, particularly words. I must be given words again and again. Because it is in the words that the earth and the sky and individual identity gets created. We are not anyone until our mother starts to speak to us, again and again for two years, and then we finally start to speak back. Then the words come back by some magical means that helps us to continue to be who we are. As we do that, we create a world through the medium of our energy as people, and our sharing of truths together. Words, always arriving, move us toward growing more aware, resilient, and kind.

This poem creates contrasting sets of images. One is a negation; the other is assertions, a series of assertions. They follow each other again and again, the stanzas, as a set kind of rhythm. The negations, negations, negations first, then the beginning of assertions, and more assertions, and the final assertion: the wiping out of—the blinding of—a god. "Fill me with words / and I will blind your God": one thing I find very interesting about the whole poem is the idea that Western culture really premises the visual over the auditory. For many native cultures, and I think some Caribbean cultures, and cultures that are indigenous the world over, it is the ear that is important. So I don't think that it is necessarily the sense of blinding in terms of a complete erasure, but a recognition and enjoyment of sound. Sound is another powerful way by which we process and understand and find the world. There's the need, then, for the eye that waits upon the ear, that listens to the ear. I think that the poets I find most inspiring are the ones that follow the truth of music and listen.

Douglas Kahn. When Bruce asked me to choose a poem, the closest one I had at hand was "Laughing Gas," and also "Ether," by Allen Ginsberg, because I'm doing some research on drugs and sound. The research on drugs and sound has to do with a larger research project on what I call "private sound" or "privatized sound," sound that one person hears alone. Other people don't hear it, or other people wouldn't hear that sound in the same way. It's an individual sound, but in its individuality, it's heard—millions of people hear sounds in that way. Most of them are sounds having to do with exceptional psychological states.

Now I want to address Bruce's words—two of the words: "pleasure" and "theory." I don't sit down with a poem and read it for pleasure. I do find pleasure in some poems that I read, but I actually would never sit down with Allen Ginsberg to find pleasure. I do respect every poem that I sit down with, every cultural phenomenon. Everything I try to grant full respect to. And I will read and research and think in an attempt to comprehend the artifact or object, the phenomenon, whatever is in front of me. And it becomes an occasion to understand a myriad of overlapping ideas and worlds. It takes me to other places, where I just wouldn't go otherwise. It's when those places start overlapping and intersecting and forming in different patterns—in what Walter Benjamin would call "constellations," what I call "hot spots"—that I find pleasure. Like I find pleasure in sitting by the campfire. So I don't find pleasure in the immediate thing, but I do find pleasure in the occasion, and the process.

In terms of the relationship of theory to Ginsberg, I deal with him the way I deal with any other person: I go to their theory. There's often an idea that theory is separate from the person, especially a historical person: people didn't *have* theories before the 1980s, before we had theory. But I try to understand their theories before anything else. Ginsberg was very much into Aldous Huxley. Huxley in 1958, in the same year as "Laughing Gas," had an article in *Saturday Evening Post*, of all places, called "Drugs That Shape Men's Minds." This

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was *Saturday Evening Post* before Pat Robertson would show up with his tin of bran muffins. He cites Bergson commenting on William James's use of nitrous oxide, saying that anesthesia was essentially bottled asceticism, and that asceticism was a way for spiritual revelations in many cultures. The last thing that William James wrote was an essay called "The Pluralistic Mystic" in 1910, the year that he died. Pluralism actually pertains to nitrous oxide and to Ginsberg's use of it in "Laughing Gas." He talks about it producing "millions of Universes." The capital-*U* Universe that he talks about in the poem is the one we occupy at present. And that's the universe that "slips into Nothing like the tail of a lizard disappearing into a crack in the Wall." That's the "now" universe that he finds reprehensible in many ways. That's the one that disappears so quickly, and its disappearing so quickly shows him the artifice of it. A lot of the poem is going in and out of this Universe that we have here, and in and out of multiple universes.

There are two sound parts in "Laughing Gas." One at the end is about the music of the spheres, and at the end of that he has the "bong" of the bell played backwards. It's his particular take on the music of the spheres. The other part of the sound is right up towards the front of the poem, where he's talking about Looney Tunes and Woody Woodpecker, "hindoo maniac laughter in the skull."

Actually, there's a lot of cartoon stuff not only in Ginsberg but throughout the beats. The whole thing about nitrous oxide is kind of goofy to begin with, because here you have mysticism in a dentist's chair. You have wider use of it, people in grocery store aisles taking the cans of whipped cream and turning them upside down and having mystical experiences. There's a goofy cosmology of the everyday. It tempers what a lot of people see as his romantic bombast, because if you read Ginsberg closely, you see that he would like to engage in it, but he's really frustrated. And he's always got this goofy thing going. He's always trying for the big God talk but never quite gets there. I would say that if there is a theory to Ginsberg, it would be a theory of the goofy cosmology of the everyday. I'm still waiting for that one to be written.

Mark McMorris. Thank you, Bruce, for these seven words. I want to look at the Césaire poem and to think about whether or not it makes sense to talk about *performing* theory. What is this poem doing? Is what it's doing intelligible in these terms? Theory—or theories? Theories of what? Self. Subjectivity. Does Césaire's poem put us in a position from which theory can *begin*? That's a different question, though they're related—the question of performing theory, or making a foundation for the beginning of theory.

Césaire is very concerned with origins. We've passed through the great age of deconstruction and the great age of the origin of the lack of origin, of the origin that is preceded, that precedes itself. I think that's the world Césaire refers to here:

> One must begin somewhere.
>
> Begin what?
> The only thing in the world
> worth beginning:
>
> The end of the world, of course.

Certainly we hear echoes of apocalypse, echoes of revelation. I think we have to understand "world" here as something that is discursive. The concern in the poem is with the raced self, the self that is produced in material conditions very much present in the poem or, if you will, a discourse that is produced by certain specific material conditions that give rise to the self. So the end of the world as a place to begin is a form of self-destruction. It's the destruction of a discourse, but it's also the destruction of the conditions that produced the discourse to begin with. It's an impossibility. How can we destroy the origin?

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If we think of world as discursive, then one of our presumptions is that the self, the first person singular, can exist apart from the world. In other words, that the world has an outside, that the world is not yet the totality of all possible entities and all possible beings. The poem leaves us with that question.

> I have assassinated God with my laziness with
> my words with my gestures
> with my obscene songs. . . .

Here you have a movement from double consciousness to what remains after you have worked at destruction as much as you can. In other words, it's a movement from double consciousness or selfhood or subjectivity to something which Césaire calls "raw zero":

> But why impenetrable jungle are you still
> hiding the raw zero of my mendacity and
> from a self-conscious concern for nobility not
> celebrating the horrible leap of my
> Pahouin ugliness?

I read this whole passage as an appropriation of the terms of a subject produced in colonial discourse. Then the subject is posed in relation to—do we want to say theories? Are these lines theorizing mimicry? They're certainly enacting mimicry, and they're enacting the subversive properties inherent in mimicry also. That's the double consciousness. This section of the poem, I think, leaves us with a question. In what way can the self be thought of as a remainder—something left over? Material conditions signaled by "a child, chewing / sugar cane root": that's a synecdoche for the entire apparatus of the plantation system. I don't think it's true that poems are obliquely positioned in relation to questions of race, gender, class, material conditions, at all. Césaire's poem is not only not oblique, it's actually in the middle of all these things. And written in the 1930s. It seems to be anticipating much of the theoretical agenda that we're so familiar with today.

Starting from "the raw zero," the poem proposes a coincidence between sound and action, or there's speech as action, orality. "Voum rooh oh / voum rooh oh": you have an invitation to the literate reader, but it's offered in bad faith. The literate reader encounters orality. An encounter is being staged here with alterity, with otherness. And otherness is being conceptualized in terms of interpretability. The reader makes progress through a kind of textual interpretability to a moment of orality, where one can trust otherness. But we have to pause there. Is this performing making the passage from colonial subject to some other subject, precolonial subject, extracolonial subject? Subject after the destruction of a discourse? What one encounters is *un*interpretability: "voum rooh oh / voum rooh oh," an entirely different semantic system if in fact it is a semantic system. So you're left at the point of being baffled. The question becomes, What about this encounter with the other? Is there something other *than*? That's what I mean by putting the reader in a position to begin theorizing, to begin theorizing alterity, otherness, and the relationship of those to meaning.

Bruce Smith. The poem I've chosen is a song by Thomas Nashe from a play called *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, which was printed in 1600, although the play itself was acted in 1592:

> *Spring, the sweete spring, is the yeres*
> *pleasant King,*
> *Then bloomes eche thing, then maydes daunce*
> *in a ring,*
> *Cold doeth not sting, the pretty birds doe sing:*
> *Cuckow, iugge, iugge, pu we, to witta woo. . . .*

This would *not* seem to be a promising subject for critical analysis using any of the dominant models in early modern studies: new historicism, cultural materialism, deconstruction, or Lacanian psychoanalytical theory. New historicism / cultural materialism could readily talk about the play in which this song is em-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bedded, a pageant played before John Whitgift, archbishop of Canterbury, in 1592, but about the song itself what can new historicism *say*? What has cultural materialism got to do with "*Cuckow, iugge, iugge, pu we, to witta woo*"? What sort of meaning is being constructed here that might be *de*constructed? Lacanian psychoanalytical theory might seize on the songness of the song and, in that guise, its challenge to the word-based symbolic order. Most recent anthologies of early modern verse—I'm thinking in particular here of David Norbrook's revised *Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse* (1993)—have bumped poems like this in favor of poems written by women and political poems. As one reviewer of this volume remarked, there seems to be no room in anthologies anymore for "Hey nonny nonny."

The challenge here is to find a way of talking about a poem like this, to do it in a way that respects the fact that it is about sound, about breath, but that it is at the same time historically grounded and politically conscious. I think there is a method for doing that: what I've been calling an historicized phenomenology, or historical phenomenology. Phenomenology proceeds from the simple proposition that you can't know anything apart from the *way* in which you come to know it. The historical part is a conviction that the conditions of knowing vary according to culture and history. The heyday of phenomenology in the 1950s and early 1960s was really a universalizing process. What I'm talking about here is really an attempt to historicize.

Take the case in point here: the text as it was printed was not even broken up visually into the three stanzas that the rhyme pattern implies. To me, that's a clue that vision is not the primary medium in which this poem asks to be known. Rather, it's designed as an experience in sound. It's an attempt to meld human speech with animal sounds. In performance, because it was a song, there was also music. My sense also is that the repetition of the word "spring" in the beginning and at the end—"Spring, the sweet spring"—has the effect of turning "spring" into a phatic sound. It's like "oh!," "ah!," "listen!" In this respect, Nashe's poem actually traces a whole cycle of sound that begins with phatic sounds, proceeds through human speech, proceeds through music, and proceeds through sounds in the ambient world, among which human phatic sounds find a place. The dominant methodologies are equipped to talk about only one quadrant of that circle of sound.

It seems to me that with the internal rhymes—"spring," "king," "thing," "ring," "sting," "sing," "may," "gay," "play," "day," "aye," "lay"—there is a centrifugal quality to the sound that is always moving away from language and actually bursts out of human language in those last lines, "*Cuckow, iugge, iugge, pu we, to witta woo*." This is an instance of what I call "hearing green"—picking up on green as the color associated with passion in early modern writing. Hearing green is hearing presemantic qualities of sound that early modern ideas about passions made possible. For us, knowledge aims at the clear and distinct objects that Descartes declared to be the only true objects of knowledge. For early modern readers and listeners, still entertaining ideas of perception from Aristotle and Galen, sensation always precedes intellection. Writings about perception in the sixteenth century and seventeenth century, particularly those at about the time Descartes was writing, had a large vocabulary and a variety of paradigms for talking about sensation as an area of experience. It is an area of experience about which we, by comparison, are speechless and clueless. Like Descartes, we are suspicious of sensation, primarily because we don't have any ready ways of talking about it. Early modern verse, I would argue, was written with a very different epistemology in mind. A puny poem like "Spring" stands as a challenge—or *can* stand as a challenge—to the Goliath-like

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tyranny of the binary that informs all four dominant critical models in today's academy.

A lot of commonalities have emerged from the conversation so far: pleasure, the individual, feelings, sound, voice, breath, the visual bias of Western culture, the question of where to begin. I think two sets of ideas have been presented. One is that these really are two separate entities, that poetry is about embodied sound, about breath, about that song in oneself, about the individual, about pleasure, whereas theory is part of the visual bias in Western culture; theory is about binaries, about visual ways of knowing things, about intellection, about group ways of knowing things because of its institutionalization in the academy as well as its focus on political issues. What I found myself thinking about toward the end was a sense of in-betweenness. In between theory and the poem are the questions of overlapping worlds, hot spots, and where to begin.

David Gewanter. It seems as though the poem occurs at the speed of speech or song, and it needs the human body to make it happen and to receive it. I don't know if that becomes an in-between place for theory, but it would be interesting to consider how theory will take us to its beginning positions, its ground-note position or its original position, the entire experience of the poem that occurs in social circumstances. Maybe Mark's pointing out material conditions and race conditions could indicate that.

Douglas Kahn. Birds may or may not be making music. They're probably saying something pretty lewd to keep somebody out of their territory. To fancy that as music is a cultural imposition. Messiaen, for instance. If you've ever heard his incorporation of birdsong, they're very alienated birds. Can a bird be existential? Theory often does not deal with the ecological. It just deals with sociality and rarely gets into what Michael McClure would call "mammalian patriotism." I would say that in fact there is a material-culture connection in Nashe's poem, but it's not social material culture. It has to do more with an environmentalist frame.

Mark McMorris. I wonder if the unresponsiveness of Nashe's poem to those theoretical models doesn't have to do with the fact that we don't have more than the poem. New historicism never just works with the fourteen lines of a sonnet. It always goes far afield. You meander through the archive and end up in a poem.

Roberta Hill. If I think about the people who enjoy poetry, and think about the way in which poetry gets configured and talked about, one of the things I find quite amazing is poetry slams. The energy that gets produced in this process is really quite tremendous to watch. And I think some of this speaks to the great loneliness that I feel within human beings. We who've been colonized and who feel generational ruptures in the midst of man-made environments seek ways to relate to animals and birds. The disparity is our need for a living earth in spite of being in an engine of urbanization. In my own culture, when you feel lonely, the best thing to do is to listen to the birds singing. The birds have medicine in their songs. When you listen to them, they help you. Many native languages are onomatopoetic. The words, the sounds of the words are the "words" that the animals and birds on this continent speak. The power of the imagination is one which I like to believe encompasses not only human beings. The universe itself is an imaginative process. We live by means of the imaginative power—the being within the leaf or voice urges us to seek the great invisible powers.

Carrie Noland. Perhaps "voum rooh oh" in Césaire's poem is not the sign of the other or the otherness of the oral, but in fact it sounds the same because it's the only thing that didn't need to be translated. I mean, in the French edition of *Le cahier d'un retour au pays natal*

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it's "voum rooh oh"; in the English translation it's the same. So it's really the marker for sound in a certain sense. "Voum rooh oh" is a marker for that which does not call for translation, and, just to go back to Professor Hill's comments, that very sound may be the thing that in fact transcends the otherness which is legible in other ways in the poem.

Marianne Hirsch. I had the very same question, which is, if embodied sound is a dominant paradigm here, how is the embodied sound then connected to languages, and what do we do and how does it change with translation? These things that sound like pure sound to us—are they also culturally coded? Would the ones in the Nashe poem and the ones in the Césaire poem sound very differently or invoke very different bodily responses in different cultural contexts? How can we account for that? What theoretical paradigms can we bring to that question?

Aldon Lynn Nielsen. I would like to take a roundabout way of agreeing with one of Mark's earlier points. I was so flummoxed by the opening sentence of the call Bruce read at the beginning that I never became the 130th submitter to the special issue, because I kept wondering where this theory was that was having this problem embracing the poem. Certainly it wasn't true of Derrida, if you look at something like his essays on Celan, which would appear to be exactly the kind of engagement that David, for example, is looking for. The virtual manifesto of the deconstruction moment at Yale consisted entirely of each author in turn addressing the same Shelley poem. And yet people recognize something in this charge. I think this gets more at the institutional question Bruce was coming to. On the one hand, it's clear that theory has become a kind of industry within most departments of English. Still, all those people that we hear at conferences on poetry who are engaging theory of poetry every day are extraordinarily unlikely ever to be invited keynoters at a theory conference. On the other side of the department, those of you who have perused the *AWP Newsletter* over the past fifteen years have seen that stultifying drumbeat of antitheory know-nothingism. As Mark, I think, said quite truly, there's nothing inherent in poetry, nothing inherent in theory, that would cause this binary, but there's a great deal in the way we set up the enterprise of English that produces this effect.

Adrienne McCormick. We can't talk about that impasse without turning our lens on both poetry and theory. What counts as theory needs to be a question as much as why poetry is seen as irrelevant to theory. Bruce brought up four major paradigms, but if we started to expand those paradigms or think more about theorizing, then we would get back to this place where we weren't positioning them in a binary, and we could then begin to see a flowering of discussion about the poetry that exists out there. We were having a discussion in an earlier session today on African American poetry about the creation of poetry out of communal locations. The idea of poetry as only created by the individual is a very limiting notion of poetry. We need to mix up a lot of these categories and be looking back and forth at them to challenge this impasse, which I think is definitely affecting the academy in what gets taught and what gets translated to our students.

Annie Finch. I came to this session straight from giving a paper at another session about meter, which seems to be the elephant in the room at this session that no one is talking about. Theories of meter, rhythm, and the physical nature of poetry are one way to bridge this gap between theory and the physical reality of poetry that Roberta was discussing. It creates a false binary to say that birdsong on the one side is untranslatable and physical, whereas on the other side we have

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human speech. Meter infuses Nashe's poem. Meter has a physicality that is untranslatable and on one level helps unite the poem with other species, with the unconscious of the human universe at large.

Douglas Kahn. The practice of the pulse within Chinese medicine has this really metaphorical base. They'll talk about one of the nine positions being the tearing of a cloth or the water running over a rock. Whereas in the Western tradition, it's arithmetic; it's "boom, boom, boom." I don't think there's anything necessarily natural about particular rhythmic traditions. They are historical.

Annie Finch. Our panel was about non-iambic meters: amphibrachs, dactyls, cretics, et cetera, which are historically quite problematic. When people generalize about Western meter as mechanical, they are usually thinking of iambic meter, which has a very particular and heavy history. The fact that something is physical or untranslatable or even helps some of us, at particular times, make a connection with nature doesn't imply claims for it as natural. Meter is not natural. However, it is a salient aspect of poems such as the Nashe and should not be left out of the equation as if it doesn't exist when we consider the special challenges of talking about poetry.

Patrick Durgin. What I'm hearing here is Black Mountain poetics, but I'm not hearing the theoretical—that's the term I'd use—thrust behind Black Mountain poetics: that is, not the transcendence of this individual and this voice, et cetera, but the social construction of the embodied word. *Language* was introduced as a magazine where writing employing poetic techniques is used in work that "traditionally discusses." All these issues, the issues of the binary: the terms were set up by Black Mountain and *Language*. That's theory doing work in poetry and not a sort of plastering.

Peter Michelson. I don't quite see the problem with binary things. These are just ways of trying to understand the phenomenological, the Heisenbergian sort of thing, the methodology, the character of your knowledge. It seems to me that the reason why Black Mountain matters to contemporary poets—or those to whom it matters—is that it isn't simply sound, and it isn't simply breath. The breath is a manifestation of the brain, and it is semantic as well as phonic. The whole history of poetry is about that. When it's not semantic, when it takes a break, as in some of these poems, there are more things going on than just the semantic. I will carry away from this session the notion that the application of theory to poetry is more or less arbitrary, that it doesn't particularly illuminate poetry, though it can be used to illuminate certain things about poetry, maybe the sociology of the play that produced the song, and the non-semantic elements, and so on.

Nicole Asquith. In addition to reconsidering what one might mean by theoretical approaches, it might also be useful to pay more attention to what is meant by "poems." I work on rethinking the history of modern poetry in the French tradition. I have ended up working on rap music as a way to radically rethink what is meant by poetry. To put one particular accent on it, I would say that one of the reasons poetry may sometimes seem a less-than-exciting subject for theoretical approaches, and more generally for the classroom, is because of our tendency to dehistoricize not only poetic form—to look at the *Cahier* form or the spring-poem form as if they were equivalent texts—but also poetic function, what it is that poets perform from a social perspective. I have found my work on rap music to be particularly stimulating in that way. It forces one to call into question, in a contemporary context, what those functions may be.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Participants (in Order of Speaking)

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ROBERTA HILL, professor of English and American Indian studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. Her poems—in addition to being printed on paper in two books, *Star Quilt* (1984) and *Philadelphia Flowers* (1996)—have been inscribed in public spaces in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She has contributed prose fiction to several anthologies, including *Talking Leaves* (1991), as well as essays to collections like *Speaking for the Generations: Native Americans on Writing* (1998). A Lila Acheson Wallace Reader's Digest Award has supported her current work on a biography of L. Rosa Minoka-Hill, an American Indian doctor.

DOUGLAS KAHN is professor and director of the Program in Technocultural Studies at the University of California, Davis. *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999), his acoustic exploration of the twentieth-century avant-garde, includes sections on Artaud and the beats, among many other figures. He has edited, with Gregory Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde* (1992) and is currently researching the trade between acoustics and electromagnetics in the arts from the late nineteenth century to the present.

MARK McMORRIS, associate professor of English at Georgetown University, maintains a special interest in Caribbean poetry. His own books of poems include *Palinurus Suite* (1992), *Moth-Wings* (1996), *The Black Reeds* (1997), and *The Blaze of the Poui* (2003). In addition, his poems have appeared in *An Anthology of New (American) Poets* (1998); his prose fiction has been anthologized in *Ancestral House: The Black Short Story in the Americas and Europe* (1995). He directs the Lannan Foundation Poetry Program at Georgetown.

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ANNIE FINCH's books of poetry include *Eve* (1997), *Calendars* (2003), and the performance poem *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* (2004). She has written and edited a number of books on poetics, including *The Ghost of Meter* and *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*, and her essay collection *The Body of Poetry* is just out in the Poets on Poetry Series from the University of Michigan Press. She is director of the Stonecoast low-residency MFA in creative writing at the University of Southern Maine. Her Web site is at http://www.AnnieFinch.com/.

PATRICK DURGIN recently received a PhD from the Poetics Program at the State University of New York, Buffalo. His dissertation reads recent Continental philosophy and American poetry toward a new theory of poetic indeterminacy. He edits and publishes Kenning Editions and is a poet with work appearing recently or soon in *Chain*, *Chicago Review*, and *Kiosk*.

PETER MICHELSON is a poet, essayist, and teacher whose books include *When the Revolution Really, Pacific Plainsong*, and *Speaking the Unspeakable*. He teaches in the Creative Writing Program of the University of Colorado, Boulder.

NICOLE ASQUITH is a PhD candidate in French literature at Johns Hopkins University. In her dissertation, "Poetry as Social Practice: Rimbaud and Hip-Hop," she explores Rimbaud and his present-day counterparts, French rappers and graffiti artists, analyzing in particular poetic practices that are continuous with social or ends-oriented uses of language.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X36886 Published online by Cambridge University Press