

## Introduction

### *Aesthetics Contra "Identity" in Contemporary Poetry Studies*

#### A Few Snapshots of the Current State of Poetry Reception

In the January 2008 issue of *PMLA*—the official publication of the Modern Language Association (MLA) sent to more than thirty thousand members in one hundred countries<sup>1</sup>—a cluster of essays by eight distinguished literary critics appeared under the title “The New Lyric Studies.”<sup>2</sup> The pieces took as their jumping-off point the eminent poetry critic Marjorie Perloff’s MLA presidential address, “It Must Change,” given in December 2006 at the annual convention in Philadelphia and later reprinted in the May 2007 issue of *PMLA*. In that talk, Perloff asks, “Why *is* the ‘merely’ literary so suspect today?” (original emphasis), contending that “the governing paradigm for so-called literary study is now taken from anthropology and history.”<sup>3</sup>

Because lyric has in our time become conflated with the more generic category of poetry,<sup>4</sup> the *PMLA* forum serves to address not only the state of lyric studies but, more broadly, the state of poetry studies today. Nine critics may seem a small number—hardly representative of the larger numbers of academic poetry critics in the country—but because of the influential reputations of the critics involved (Perloff and Jonathan Culler in particular);<sup>5</sup> because the MLA, despite the ridicule to which it is sometimes subjected, is the largest, most powerful and influential professional organization for professors and academic critics of literature; and because the *PMLA*

reaches a wider and broader audience than any other literary-critical journal,<sup>6</sup> the views of these particular critics are highly visible and influential and cannot be easily discounted or dismissed. The MLA is one of what Edward Said calls the “authoritative and authorizing agencies” of culture in the Arnoldian sense (*WTC*, 8). Individual articles in *PMLA* may be overlooked, but statements by high-profile members about the state of the field of literary criticism—especially when marked by an adjective such as “New”—are often noticed and by a not insignificant number of readers.

In quite a few respects, the arguments made in “The New Lyric Studies” were varied: from Culler’s making the case for the specialness of lyric—with its “memorable language” and its being “characteristically extravagant”<sup>7</sup>—to Rei Terada’s calling that we “[be] release[d] from lyric ideology” and “let ‘lyric’ dissolve into literature and ‘literature’ into culture”<sup>8</sup> (Robert Kaufman, the requisite Marxist contributor, splits the difference by claiming, via Adorno and Benjamin, that lyric is special precisely because it operates ideologically by the same “version of aura or semblance” that the commodity form does<sup>9</sup>); from Stathis Gourgouris’s and Brent Edwards’s urging that lyric scholars engage with truer and more incisive forms of interdisciplinarity;<sup>10</sup> to Oren Izenberg’s assertion that “it makes good sense to bring literary study into closer proximity with the disciplines that give accounts of how the mind works,” such as “the philosophy of mind, philosophical psychology, and metaphysics that deal with the nature of mental phenomena and their relation not so much to the determinations of culture as to the causal structure of reality.”<sup>11</sup> Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins both argue for more and better historicization: Jackson—pushing against the tendency to make poetry and lyric abstract, idealized, and transhistorical—urges that we “trace . . . the history of lyricization”; Prins, that we examine “the cultural specificity of poetic genres” and the history of poetics and prosody.<sup>12</sup>

Yet despite the various methodological, disciplinary, and aesthetic inclinations of the respondents, there are moments of agreement, some expected and others less so, sometimes cutting across the familiar “literary versus cultural” divide within literary studies. Not surprisingly among scholars committed to the “literary,” Culler, like

Perloff, makes the familiar validating move of tracing the history of lyric back to the Greeks. Gourgouris, too, bolsters his arguments by appealing to the authority of ancient Greece (not so unexpected given that he works on Greek literature), taking Perloff slightly to task for too narrowly conceiving of *poietike*, which she translates as “the discipline of poetics.” But Gourgouris—who makes the point that Perloff “does not inquire if ‘poetics’ can be conducted nowadays in a fresh language”—does agree with her claim that literary studies has taken a wrong turn, though for him the reasons are internal to the field and not, as Perloff suggests, because interdisciplinarity, in the form of anthropological and historical paradigms, has been a bad influence. Gourgouris writes in “*Poiein*—Political Infinitive,”

For a decade or more since 1990, the microidentitarian shift in theory precipitated a failure of self-interrogation, especially regarding the paradoxes of the new disciplinary parameters that emerged out of the practice of interdisciplinarity. As a result, literary studies (and other disciplines) suffered, not so much a defanging, as Perloff implies, but rather carelessness, perhaps even arrogance—one is a symptom of the other—which led the discipline to abandon self-interrogation and instead hop on the high horse of identity politics. In other words, if Perloff’s scenario for the relegation of literary studies to a secondary practice is legitimate, the devaluation is not external but self-induced. (224)

This moment is surprising in that Gourgouris, who strongly advocates for, in effect, a “truer” form of interdisciplinarity—one that “requires, by definition, the double work of mastering the canonical and the modes of interrogating it” (225)—and who emphatically states that “[p]oetry cannot be understood except in relation to life” (227), places the blame for the fall of literary studies so firmly and unquestioningly on “the high horse of identity politics”—presumably not “relat[ed] to life”—the end result of “carelessness” and the abandoning of “self-interrogation.” Indeed, “identity” has already been referenced as a dirty word earlier in the quote when Gourgouris speaks of the “microidentitarian shift in theory” and its having “precipitated a failure of self-interrogation.” Let me delay my discussion of this critique of “identity politics” for now and turn to another moment of agreement in *PMLA*.

On page two of his essay “Poems Out of Our Heads,” Oren Izenberg—before asserting that literary studies be brought in closer proximity with more scientific “disciplines that give accounts of how the mind works”—makes common cause with Perloff, quoting her:

I share much of Perloff’s resistance to viewing poetry as “symptoms of cultural desires, drives, anxieties, or prejudices” and to the sometimes haphazard forms of interdisciplinarity that this view fosters. (217)

This move is also somewhat surprising, for aesthetic and methodological rather than disciplinary reasons: not only has Izenberg been harshly critical in print of the Language poets, of whom Perloff has been a pioneering and fierce champion, but his privileging of analytic philosophy’s methods do not align with Perloff’s more Continental proclivities and her more literary historical approaches to poetry.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, whatever other aesthetic, methodological, and disciplinary differences may separate them, Gourgouris, Izenberg, and Perloff do converge when thinking about one of the reasons—if not the major reason—for the fallen state of literary studies: forms of sloppy (careless, haphazard) thinking, slightly differentiated but fundamentally linked, that privilege, variously, the sociological over the literary (Perloff); identity politics over rigorous self-interrogation (Gourgouris); the cultural over the literary or philosophical or something called “reality” and its “causal structure” (Izenberg). In other words, scholarly overconcern with the cultural, including the political—dismissed as unspecified “anxieties” and “prejudices”—has seduced serious literary scholars away from the proper study of the literary, specifically poetry. Perloff posits this binary quite starkly in her presidential address:

Still, I wonder how many of us, no matter how culturally and politically oriented our own particular research may be, would be satisfied with the elimination of literary study from the curriculum. (656)

Despite her use of the first-person plural pronoun, Perloff suggests that such “culturally and politically oriented” research is precisely the research that “use[s] literary texts” instrumentally, as “windows

through which we see the world beyond the text, symptoms of cultural drives, anxieties, or prejudices” (654). She ends her address by forcefully exhorting,

It is time to trust the literary instinct that brought us to this field in the first place 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)

More rigorous training in the discipline of literary studies—though oddly, a discipline rooted in an “instinct” that brought “us” into the field in the first place (who is included in this “us” and “we?”)—is posited as the antidote to the deleterious cultural and political turn, seen as a “lusting after” the “exotic.”

For Perloff, this either-or choice obtains not only with literary methods and disciplines but also with individual authors and texts themselves. In her spring 2006 “President’s Column” written for the *MLA Newsletter*, she writes more explicitly and directly of what choices are at stake:

Under the rubrics of African American, other minorities, and post-colonial, a lot of important and exciting novels and poems are surely studied. But what about what is not studied? Suppose a student (undergraduate or graduate) wants to study James Joyce or Gertrude Stein? Virginia Woolf or T.E. Lawrence or George Orwell? William Faulkner or Frank O’Hara? the literature of World Wars I and II? the Great Depression? the impact of technology on poetry and fiction? modernism vis-à-vis fascism? existentialism? the history of modern satire or pastoral? Or, to put it in the most everyday terms, what of the student who has a passionate interest in her or his literary world—a world that encompasses the digital as well as print culture but does not necessarily differentiate between the writings of one subculture or one theoretical orientation and another? Where do such prospective students turn?<sup>24</sup>

What is one to make of this suggestion that Joyce and Woolf and Faulkner or any of the other canonical authors listed are not being studied because curricula are crammed full with the works of, say,

Chinua Achebe and Gwendolyn Brooks?<sup>15</sup> (Since Perloff does not mention the names of minority or postcolonial writers—only that “a lot” of their work is “surely” being studied—one can only guess which writers she is referring to.)<sup>16</sup> What is most noteworthy in this passage is not that Perloff opposes the “important and exciting novels and poems” of “African American, other minorities, and postcolonial” writers against the great works of Joyce et al. (Joyce himself a postcolonial writer) but that, rather, she explicitly sets up an opposition, “in the most everyday terms,” between the “literary” and the writings of these racialized<sup>17</sup> and postcolonial subjects who are members of “subculture[s].”<sup>18</sup>

For Perloff, the problem is not the death of literary print culture at the hands of the digital, as some critics lament—she is forward-thinking in championing new technologies and rightly sees no contradiction between the literary/poetic and the digital, or even between the literary and the cultural (there is no problem in studying a topic as sociological as “the Great Depression”)—but that the works of “African American, other minorities, and postcolonial” writers leave no room in the curricula for those works that satisfy “the student who has a passionate interest in her or his literary world.”<sup>19</sup> Perloff explicitly frames the choice as one between “passionate” and “literary” writing by famous named authors, all white, and an undifferentiated mass of unliterary writing by nameless minority authors.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps because she is writing in the more informal context of an organizational newsletter, Perloff feels freer to be more explicit about what exactly threatens the “literary” than in her MLA presidential address “It Must Change,” where she uses more generic terms such as “culturally and politically oriented” research—though we can fairly accurately guess what the indefinite pronoun “It” in the title refers to.

My critique here is directed not at Perloff’s views as an individual scholar but at an ideological position that she articulates in her MLA presidential address and the newsletter—one widely held in the academy but not usually so straightforwardly stated. Indeed, I admire the forthrightness with which Perloff expresses what many literary scholars think and feel but do not say except, perhaps, between the enclosed walls of hiring meetings: the frightening specter that,

because of “politically correct” cultural-studies-ish pressures in the academy, presumably the detrimental legacy of both 1960s activism and the culture wars of the 1980s, worthy, major, and beloved works of literature—whose merits are “purely literary”—are being squeezed out of the curriculum by inferior works penned by minority writers, whose representation in the curriculum is solely the result of affirmative action or racial quotas or because their writings have passed an ideological litmus test, not literary merit. This sentiment is usually expressed in a manner much more coded though, nonetheless, clearly understood.

What makes it particularly disappointing that Perloff is the one using the powerful forum of the MLA presidency to express these conventional (and literary-establishment) views on minority writing and race is that for decades, she has fought hard to open the academy to unconventional modes and forms of poetry, which were often not considered poetry or even literature, at a time when there was no institutional reward for doing so. She was one of the first, and certainly the most prominent and vocal academic literary critic, to champion the Language poets and is almost single-handedly responsible for their now having become officially canonized and holding appointments at various prestigious English departments across the nation, such as the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Pennsylvania. Anyone who works on avant-garde poetic writing in this country owes a debt to her—including myself.<sup>21</sup>

In the particular 2008 issue of the *PMLA* in question, it is left to Brent Edwards—the only critic in the group of eight respondents who writes on ethnic literature (and is himself African American)—the task of explicitly making the argument for the social in his response, “The Specter of Interdisciplinarity,” to Perloff’s “It Must Change” address and her posited binary of the “cultural” and the “political” versus the “literary”:<sup>22</sup>

Perloff uses “merely” [in her rhetorical question “Why *is* the ‘merely’ literary so suspect today?”] to suggest that the literary, even if threatened or “suspect,” can nevertheless be considered in isolation, as the core of a disciplinary practice. (189)