to "justify" itself by performing an unsuitable task. Whether as a concept or an instance, lyric primarily helps us to think lyrically. It frustrates those interested only in "conclusions," "conceptual" or not. For this reason, the art form and its analysis offer a poor means to resolve "sociopolitical and philosophical problems." Instead, interdisciplinary analysis should clarify differences between the works under consideration; it should sharpen powers of discernment and quality of attention. In my work on hip-hop's use of rhyme, for instance, I am interested in how it challenges contemporary print-based poetry's use of the same technique. Such analysis seeks to reveal the two forms' limitations and their accomplishments. For this reason, Terada's rousing call, "Let's let 'lyric' dissolve into literature and 'literature' into culture," advocates a confusion that literary studies ought to resist. Instead, as other colloquium participants observe, "lyric" needs to be defined more precisely, enabling more accurate, perceptive readings.

Perhaps a generational difference resides at the heart of my differences with Terada. The developments she sees as novel strike me as commonsensical. When poetry scholars attend to the most interesting language that surrounds them, whether in hip-hop or in computer-generated texts, I see evidence of poetry's influence and the challenge the art faces. As I noted in one of my presentations, a poem offers a model of curiosity, but curiosity enjoys little cultural standing. Poetry demands and rewards a careful concentration, an inquisitiveness about everything the text evokes and avoids. Regardless of the grander claims sometimes made for it, poetry teaches little else so well.

David Caplan
Ohio Wesleyan University

Reply:

Regarding David Caplan's first point, I don't see how my observation of improved generic openness on poetry panels at the 2006 MLA convention as a whole can be weakened by the fact that one of his papers treated Charles Bernstein.

As for the second and more substantive point, although I'm glad that Caplan finds it commonsensical for poetry scholars to "attend to the most interesting language that surrounds them" regardless of genre or canonicity, his letter registers the continuing tension that this commonsensical idea produces. Despite his own interest in hip-hop and Bernstein, he thinks that "if anything, the MLA devotes too much attention to self-professed 'avant-garde work,'" would like genres and disciplines to be further defined, and finds it an appropriate goal for research to "reveal" the "limitations and . . . accomplishments" of compared forms or techniques. It's true that if these are one's main goals, the fact that one works on hip-hop may not change anything. I find it hard to believe that they really are Caplan's main goals, as opposed to explaining the reasons why a form's limitations and accomplishments appear as such. Unless formal phenomena are to be experienced as naturalized objects of which one produces ever more "accurate" interpretations, formal qualities cannot stand by themselves as objects of a curiosity that does not extend to the sociopolitical and the philosophical. I didn't claim, however, that research should "resolve" problems; I wrote that it should be conducted conceptually and lead to "conceptual conclusions." Interesting conclusions will often have to do with the ambiguity of the problems in view or the inadequacy of current concepts. It was my perception that most of the poetry papers at the convention understood the need to work with language in this way and thus acknowledged that contemplation of the details of lyric forms per se neither has nor merits much cultural value. I was pleasantly surprised—for reasons that Caplan's letter now reminds me of—that the poetry panels at the convention seemed to take this for granted.

Rei Terada
University of California, Irvine

Theories of Relativity

To the Editor:

Jonathan Stone's essay "Polyphony and the Atomic Age: Bakhtin's Assimilation of an

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Einsteinian Universe" (123 [2008]: 405–21) is intriguing and illuminating, particularly in regard to Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope."

But Stone's account elides some serious problems with Bakhtin's allusions to Einstein. According to Stone, "At the end of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin reiterates the core of this project to introduce the indeterminacy of the age of relativity into literary theory" (416). If this was the core of Bakhtin's project, then the core was at odds with the theory of relativity. The phrase "the age of relativity" obscures the fact that "indeterminacy" was in fact not a feature of the theory of relativity but rather a feature of quantum theory. Furthermore, the theory of relativity and quantum theory are incompatible and mutually exclusive explanations of some phenomena. Einstein, the author of the theory of relativity, adamantly rejected the element of indeterminacy in quantum theory and famously said on a number of occasions that "God does not play dice with the universe." Einstein spent much of his later life in a vain effort to refute the notion that indeterminacy is a constituent element of physical reality. If Bakhtin muddled together the theory of relativity and quantum theory, commentators on Bakhtin should point this out and not repeat his mistake.

Bakhtin's possible failure to understand the distinction and incompatibility between the theory of relativity and quantum theory is minor compared with a much larger problem with his argument about the cultural significance of the theory of relativity. According to Stone, "By redirecting relativity into the aesthetic, Bakhtin ushered the literary universe into the twentieth century" (416). Supposedly, the theory of relativity made possible for the first time the concept of the subjectivity of perception in general, and that made possible for the first time truly polyphonic works, works that presented the differing perspectives of characters and did not impose the author's monologic perspective.

But long before Bakhtin or Einstein came along, thoughtful people were aware that perceptions are relative or subjective. They were aware, for example, that the perspective of an observer on the ground differs from that of an observer in a tower, that the perspective of an observer close to an object differs from that of an observer far away from the object, that a peasant's perspective differs from a monarch's, that the perspective of a person in one time and place differs from that of a person in another time and place, that no human being is capable of achieving an absolutely objective perspective, that only an omniscient god could have such a perspective, and so on. As momentous as Einstein's discovery was, it merely extended the familiar concept of relativity to an area (the rate at which time actually passes) that had been presumed to be free of relativity.

Relativities of the more mundane varieties described above have been a major element in literature since at least the Renaissance. Montaigne, for example, analyzed numerous examples of the subjectivity of perceptions, explored the implications of the fact that no human being is capable of attaining absolute objectivity, and made clear that his own perspective was limited and fallible. In Shakespeare's plays, characters give voice, often compellingly, to diverse perceptions. Portia presents her point of view eloquently and memorably ("The quality of mercy is not strain'd . . ."), but so does Shylock ("Hath not a Jew eyes? . . ."). No omniscient narrator tells playgoers what to make of Portia's and Shylock's conflicting perceptions. It is hard to imagine works more polyphonic than Shakespeare's plays. Some even earlier authors went out of their way to avoid the suggestion that a narrator was omniscient, perhaps because that would have been a sacrilegious assumption of a perspective that was reserved to God. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer created a narrator who repeatedly acknowledges that his account is based on hearsay and hence is fallible. Stone accepts at face value Bakhtin's claim that the theory of relativity ushered in an age in which genuine polyphony (although anticipated by Dostoevsky) was now possible for the first time, but that claim is contradicted by plentiful evidence from earlier ages.

James Hirsh
Georgia State University

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