“The Tasks of Translation in the Global Context,” a theme of permanent significance, provided the frame of reference for the 125th MLA Annual Convention held in Philadelphia, December 27-30, 2009. The Presidential Address, Forum, and Theme Sessions directly related to the convention theme. President Catherine Porter sounded the keynote in her Address, demonstrating why “English Is Not Enough” (appearing in PMLA 125:3, May 2010: 546-555). Papers not immediately connecting to the frame explored aspects of translation whenever pertinent. Out of a program of over 500 individual listings (appearing in PMLA 124:6, November 2009: 2015-2132), the present report will highlight selected poetry sessions, obviously based on the reporter’s personal convention program but concentrating on issues of wider importance to the field of poetry studies.

A session of poetry in performance was featured in celebration of the 20th anniversary of what has developed into an MLA institution by now: the Off-Site Poetry Reading, an event offering North American poetry in progress or forthcoming, this time including work by Laura Moriarty and Charles Bernstein. The sessions in poetry scholarship reviewed here approached their subject from one or more of the following angles: epistemology, ethnicity, ideology, and pedagogy. In the following cross sections of each category, the broadest common denominator is a notable interest in the aesthetics of poetry, particularly in its prosodic dimensions.

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“Poetry and Epistemology” as a research paradigm informed the meeting of the Division on Comparative Studies in Romanticism and the Nineteenth Century, entitled “The Thinking Proper to Poetry.” Examining poetic knowledge in two sonnets by Wordsworth, “Composed after a Journey across the Hamilton Hills, Yorkshire” (publ. 1807) and “These words were uttered in a pensive mood” (publ. 1807), Charles Waite
Mahoney regarded the “surmise” as the “figure of thinking in Romantic poetry,” a figuration of time, and the quintessential activity of the poetic speaker. Revisiting Mörike’s classic “Auf eine Lampe” (1846), Marshall J. Brown, in pursuing the lead question “How do poets think?”, interpreted thought as an imperilment of the poetic speaker’s “Biedermeier sensibility.” Yet the poem reflects Leibniz’s idea of God “who makes art out of every irregularity,” and ranks as “the perfect Kantian artwork,” an embodiment of interesseloses Wohlgefallen.

Brown offered his own translation of the original, as did Kristina Mendicino for her presentation, an ambitious reading of one of Hölderlin’s later hymns (1803): “Hölderlin’s ‘Patmos’ and Meter’s λόγος: The Philosophical Content of Meter.” Mendicino found the “philosophical content” to be a symbolic representation of Pindar’s concept of the metron as a “movement between two extremes.” In analogy to the poem’s prosody ‘moving’ between adapted Greek quantitative and German(ic) accentual-syllabic versification, its speaker is ‘moving’ between the “extremes” of encountering the human and the divine. Mendicino referenced Hölderlin’s translations of Pindar and his commentaries on Sophocles in explicating his own poetic practice: thus the notion of measure – Pindar’s metron, Hölderlin’s Maas – in “Patmos” figures in the senses both of ‘existential order’ and ‘meter,’ and evokes a sonic landscape evolving from a state of dearth to one of plenitude.

The ethnopoetries were represented by a panel on African American prosody, described as the first on this subject at MLA, and arranged as a special session (i.e., not by a specific Society, Division or Discussion Group). The panelists perceived the analysis of prosody as an approach to understanding African American culture at large. Keisha Bowman viewed as “generic restlessness” the transformation of Ovid’s text from Metamorphoses in colonial poet Phillis Wheatley’s “Niobe in Distress” (1773), which in turn went through its twentieth-century re-interpretations in Gwendolyn Brooks’ Annie Allan (1949) and Rita Dove’s Mother Love (1995). Respondent Aldon Lynn Nielsen recognized in Bowman’s paper the “beginning of the long-needed work on the African American long poem.” Shanna Greene Benjamin pursued negotiations of the “Whiteness” of the sonnet as a fixed, architectural structure versus its African American potential for communalism, performativity, and vernacularism. She described the meter and syntax of Claude McKay’s “The Mulatto” (1925) as a “containment of protest,” then examined “the lurid confessions of an ex-cake junky,” the first of Wanda Coleman’s American Sonnets (1994), a collection in a tradition that Coleman terms the “jazz sonnet.”

Meta DuEwa Jones tackled Natasha Trethewey’s Native Guard (2006) and C.S. Giscombe’s Giscome Road (1998), which employ photography and mapping, respectively, for their structural paradigms. In Trethewey’s “Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971” (a poem about the killing of the poet’s mother by her stepfather) the “photograph” creates a stylized “frame” to
the landscapes of male violence and the suffering of the mother. The title of Giscombe’s *Giscome Road* refers to a British Columbia wilderness road built by a nineteenth-century near-namesake of the poet, Jamaican-born immigrant John Robert Giscome. According to Jones, the typographic and topographic patterns, or “fictions of photography and cartography,” are transformed in their “prosodic enaction” and “mediated by race and gender.” Jones concluded that “the place of the poem is the theme of the poem.” Perhaps it should be added, however, that the strategies used by Trethewey and Giscombe are their individual, innovative applications of techniques that have long been familiar in concrete and visual poetry.

“Poetry and Ideology” provided the angle of discussion in a gathering of the Langston Hughes Society. Taken together, the three contributions made for a comprehensive account of Hughes as a proponent of political and literary transnationalism who in turn benefited from his contacts with autochthonous cultures in West Africa (1923, 1954, 1966), Cuba and Haiti (1929-1930), the former Soviet Union (1932-1933), and Spain (1937). Tara T. Green stressed Hughes’ “double consciousness” of Africanity and African Americanness. In her perception, Hughes helped instigate a modern, independent African and Caribbean literature, as in the cases of Senegal’s Léopold Sédar-Senghor and Martinique’s Nardal Sisters (Paulette and Jane), and advocated a global African American aesthetics, as in the case of Negritude/négritude, a movement created by U.S. Blacks in France. Conversely, Green noted the emergence of a political stance in Hughes’ own poetry (“Lumumba’s Grave,” 1961). She named ancient African rhythms and Ashanti stories as influences on his work and drew attention in passing to the German translations of his poetry (by Hanna Meuter, Eva Hesse, and Stephan Hermlin, among others). Similarly, from an anti-hegemonic stance, Karima K. Jeffrey considered Hughes a “post-colonial” author (on the side alerting her audience to new digital photographic materials of him that are now becoming available through Yale’s Beinecke Library).

Char Prieto thematized Hughes’ position in Civil War Spain. There, the African American author supported the interracial anti-Fascist forces, including U.S. Blacks who, in a conflict of loyalties, saw themselves pitted against North Africans pressed into Franco’s army in order to maintain Fascist rule in their home countries. Hughes drew parallels between fascist-racists in Spain and in the United States (“Letter from Spain: Addressed to Alabama,” 1937). He detected affinities with Spanish intellectuals not only in ideology but also in artistry, as manifested in *Gypsy Ballads* (1951), his translation of Federico García Lorca’s *Romancero gitano* (1928), and in his borrowings from the flamenco, which he thought congenial to jazz and the blues in mood and sensibility.

Challenges of teaching a cosmopolitan author were foregrounded in a panel of the Ezra Pound Society. Ira Nadel established connections between Pound and Thomas Jefferson, identifying the nexus of politics and
a “culture of performance” as the defining linkage. To Pound, Jefferson represented the humanist in the intellectual tradition of the eighteenth-century encyclopedists. The two Americans shared an interest in a number of ideas: the origins of culture; proportionality (to Jefferson, “a moral concept”); accuracy; music; and language and discourse (the latter perhaps due to both men’s interest in Homer).

John Gery then studied Pound’s exile as his formative experience. Facing the loss of home, Pound gained authenticity in his “sinceritas of style,” which provided stability to the poet in “fear of erasure.” Amazingly (at least to the present writer), over time even Pound, the master of language(s), “lost some of his American English” in exile. In Personae (1909, 1926), the poet’s collection of his early short poems, Gery found “the signature of his artistry” already. Aspects of Pound’s style also came to the fore as Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos traced types of intertextuality, such as translating rhetorical devices, rather than words, in order to achieve textual cohesion; complicated quotation techniques; ironical mis-transcriptions; or testing the reader’s command of classical Greek – something Pound enjoyed doing. Tryphonopoulos suggested using such exercises in the classroom to give students a glimpse into Pound’s workshop who, unlike Eliot, does not supply commentary on his allusions, rather leaving the “spade work” to his readers.

Summing up, emphasis in the sessions under review lay on comparative and transnational approaches and issues; on poetic knowledge; and on the modern and contemporary periods, including a number of emerging poets. As noted above, prosody served as the connecting link. While all of the presentations were substantial, obviously not every aspect discussed was new altogether. From an Americanist vantage point, the poetry sessions at large paid regrettably scant attention to fields such as early American poetry; Native American poetry; or the poetry of the environment – work suggested by Angus Fletcher’s subtle design of A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination (Harvard UP, 2004).

Looking ahead: Unquestionably, the internationality of the large convention as a conference format is one of its assets and makes for its academic attraction, as an eye-opener and an inspiration, for richness of results and discernment of research needs and opportunities. In the 2009 poetry sessions sampled here, some potential future directions for prosody – the category most germane to poetry, and more germane to poetry than to any other literary or rhetorical genre – became evident. Through and beyond particulars and specifics, long-term desiderata in prosody scholarship are cross-disciplinary and translational methodologies, as well as syntheses of linguistic and literary prosody studies. The future study of prosody, ideally, would bring together scholars from a variety of fields, at least including acoustic phonetics, diachronic and sociolinguistic phonol-
ogy, linguistic typology, linguistic anthropology, classics, historical rhetoric, and translation studies.

From an American Studies perspective, a ‘comparative prosody’ of American ‘ethnoprosodies’ would be at the center of desiderata. For example, precisely which distinctive phonic features occur in ancient Ashanti and its verse, and how do they appear in African American poetry, beginnings to present?

From a General and Comparative Linguistics and Poetics perspective, the description of ‘prosodic universals’ would be foremost. Translingual approaches would further insight into the functions of prosodemes across language types – the phenomena at work in the speech process as sound production and poetry recital. How are suprasegmental cohesion and its aesthetic and rhetorical effects different in pre-Confucian song and chant; the Shoalwater, Chinook and Kathlamet oral texts collected by Franz Boas in the Pacific Northwest; Hellenic choric lyric; Pound’s *Cantos*; or experimental performance poetry? What are the similarities and differences in the way “poeticity” is constituted across languages, literatures and cultures?

To work on these and related questions, “English Is Not Enough” indeed: President Catherine Porter’s call for a new agenda thus could not have been timelier. Apropos of time: the Association has changed its convention schedule. Philadelphia 2009 marked the last meeting in December, no meeting took place in 2010. From Los Angeles 2011 onward, January is the month of the MLA Annual Convention.

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