

is one of our most accomplished poet-critics. Gilbert's claim is not necessarily a grave injustice but an oversight to be corrected.

JERRY W. WARD, JR.
Tougaloo College

To the Editor:

I enjoyed reading Sandra Gilbert's Presidential Address so much that I want to suggest two emendations.

Surely Howard Mumford Jones belongs in the distinguished company of poets-and-presidents. He published at least half a dozen volumes of original poetry, translations, and a "chronicle" of a poet (Thomas Moore). His editing (with Dougald MacMillan) of *Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (Holt, 1931) is a model of creative scholarship and a delight. Read his important *Autobiography* (Wisconsin, 1979).

And I strongly object to "arbitrary standards set by a single stonily monumental canon of quasi-sacred Great Books" (375). As a regular reader of *The Great Ideas Today* (ed. John Van Doren [Britannica]), I find every word here a travesty of truth. But then there is little easier than negative criticism. I try to listen more to critics' affirmations than to their negations (consider Samuel Johnson).

SHOLOM J. KAHN
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Reply:

I am grateful to Jerry W. Ward, Jr., for giving me the opportunity to encounter another facet of Houston Baker. Although I have long known and admired both Houston and his many contributions to contemporary criticism, I hadn't been familiar with his poetic achievement until now. Similarly, I want to thank Sholom J. Kahn for introducing me to another facet of Howard Mumford Jones, whose massive bibliography (104 items in the University of California's online Melvyl catalog!) does include several volumes of his own verse. Perhaps, as these examples suggest, it's all too often the case in academic institutions, where we focus so intensely on research, that (as Virginia Woolf put it in a very different context) "the poetry is still denied outlet." Yet as I have tried to argue, poet-critics—theorists who are also practitioners—surely have a special perspective to offer our discipline. So if there were other MLA presidents who were poet-critics, I'd love to learn more about their work—and I hereby apologize for having omitted them from my talk.

As for Kahn's objection to "arbitrary standards set by a single stonily monumental canon," I assume he is protesting my phrase and not the notion of excellence implicit in the concept of standards. If so, there isn't a very significant disagreement between us, since three paragraphs earlier in my essay I speculated that teachers of creative writing are among "the last literary thinkers to subscribe to some notion of excellence" and aligned myself with Richard Rorty's view that even if canons are "temporary and touchstones replaceable," this "should not lead us to discard the idea of greatness" (375). I certainly meant my remarks (as I trust Rorty intended his) to affirm the idea of greatness while also reminding my audience that the MLA was founded in precisely the "spirit of innovation" that I praised in the paragraph from which Kahn quotes.

SANDRA M. GILBERT
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Expanding In Memoriam

To the Editor:

As someone who has been a member of the MLA for a number of years and has been looking for a *good* position throughout most of them (and who also has a strong regard for history), I have always read the In Memoriam listings with interest.

In the January 1997 listings (162), I note several things—that one person named, Constance Coiner, of the State University of New York, Binghamton, is familiar as a victim of the July 1996 air disaster over Long Island; that though the listing is short, it includes two names with the now rather unusual forename *Sumner*; that one institution, the University of Maine, Orono, suffered two losses within five days; and that the dates of death go back as far as two years, to January 1995. But though these statistical observations are interesting (at least to me), the brief roll call gives no sense of the accomplishments of these people or of the losses that teaching and scholarship have sustained.

Especially as the role of the personal becomes more prominent (or more openly admitted and accepted) in our perspectives and because we are people who live by our *vitae*, it might be worthwhile to give more space regularly to some brief accounts of the lives who leave our number. I'd like to know more about those listed in In Memoriam, and insofar as *PMLA* provides a history of the profession over the past hundred something years, such accounts would help to particularize and personalize that history.

There could be simply short paragraphs, following a more or less standard form, giving date of death, name, most recent position, education, specialities and particular contributions, noteworthy students or mentors, and the period of membership in the MLA or other organizations. There is a custom that following the publication of an obituary in the London *Times*, colleagues or other associates of the departed write letters beginning, "May I add a word about [whomever]?" and mentioning specific qualities or occasions that demonstrated the subject's character. Room might be allowed in *PMLA* for such remembrances by colleagues, students, and others. When those outside the profession of language and literature wonder about its methods or worth, such a brief accounting of what our members have done and have meant to others could speak volumes.

I'd also like to suggest that the listings be arranged chronologically—date first, followed by the name, in boldface or italics—to add to the historical march of the notations. And although it may sound callously whimsical, a chronological arrangement would also contribute to such observations as my impression that a goodly number of these faithful and dutiful members of the profession depart on their own time—during summer or interim breaks or at the beginning of the academic year. (It seemed clear to me in graduate school that at my university academics made major changes—like adopting new hair styles, growing beards, marrying, having babies, divorcing—between terms, and there appeared to be a long-established custom that some one or two would die or go mad at the beginning of a new academic year. One year this convention took the form of an overly Romanticism-influenced undergraduate's attempted suicide by something like laudanum at the fountain and pond in the middle of the campus.) I'm sorry if this hypothesis sounds insensitive or lacking in due gravitas, but it seems fairly worth

a moment's consideration in any weighing of the reconciliations of literature and life.

When the members are surveyed on what they like or don't like about *PMLA* and what they read or don't read in it, I believe you would find that a goodly proportion would follow assiduously such a regular feature, which might be placed more respectfully in the editorial pages rather than amidst the advertisements, following the "Internet news."

HELENE SOLHEIM
Bellevue, WA

Persons' Titles in the Forum

To the Editor:

Civility in professional discourse has become a topic much discussed, in settings from op-ed pages to professional journals. Incivility in *PMLA* manifests itself most clearly at times in the Forum. The *PMLA* house style of omitting titles before persons' names adds to the harsh tone of too many letters.

The editor could contribute directly to a civil academic discourse by ensuring that persons are referred to first by full name and then by surname preceded by a title. For those who are neither professors nor holders of the doctorate, I would suggest inserting simply *Ms.* or *Mr.* These two titles lend an egalitarian air that counters the hierarchy of professorships. *Ms.* and *Mr.* have at least one drawback, however: a distinction based on sex. Nevertheless, this disadvantage is mitigated by the curb that the titles would place on the rancorous tone of many letter writers—a tone that some detractors of the academy celebrate.

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