

and J. Le Goff? They would not have agreed, however, with the current bias that sees “literary tradition . . . as hopelessly elitist and retrograde,” noted in the Forum by Katie Trumpener and Richard Maxwell (263). But all these men were or are French (cf. Thomas Pavel’s remarks about “highly literate cultures” [268]). So perhaps they should not be taken as models by American scholars. As historians they admitted, I think, that each period has its way of thinking and should be treated according to its characteristics. The twentieth century will probably appear to be defined by something more complex than a political division between an “elite” and popular attitudes. Why, then, since most of the Forum writers are American, does no one recall the role played by Andy Warhol and his sharp critiques of industrial productions; Claes Oldenburg (although Dutch, he has produced the major part of his pop art work in the United States), who created enormous hamburgers; Duane Hanson, portrayal of average people in their average lives, such as a housewife pushing her cart through the alleys of a supermarket; and Roy Lichtenstein and his treatment of comic strips? All their works are strongly based on American everyday life. Could not works like these be foundations for an all-American cultural studies that would at last stand up without European references?

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### Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*

To the Editor:

I read with interest Jahan Ramazani’s essay, “The Wound of History: Walcott’s *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction” (112 [1997]: 405–17), for I have recently been writing on Walcott’s masterpiece and have often taught it. Although I doubt that any scholar can account for every allusion in a work that plays so profoundly on what might be called the “rhymes,” or slanted repetitions and coincidences, of history, I thought that Ramazani and the readers of *PMLA* would be interested to know more about Catherine Weldon, who is described in the essay as “a white settler woman of the American plains” to whom “Walcott attributes . . . ‘the wound of her son’s // death from a rusty nail’” (414).

Weldon has in fact a more complex relation to the poem’s critique of imperialism and to the theme of Philoctete’s wound. Catherine Weldon went west from Brooklyn alone in 1889 as the field representative of the National Indian Defense Association. Later she had her

young son, Christie, sent to join her. She learned Sioux, became a close associate of Sitting Bull, and was for a time a member of his household. She translated works of occidental history for the Sioux, including stories of the Trojan War. Because of her support for Sitting Bull’s cause, the government exiled her to Parkins’ Farm, a nearby homestead, where she lived in a sod-roofed hut and continued her activities on behalf of Indian rights. (Walcott plays in a number of places with dropped *s*’s in *Omeros*, making Philoctete from Philoctetes, Achilles from Achilles, Parkin Farm from Parkins’ Farm.) Weldon was a witness to the Ghost Dance uprising, and her public opposition to it strained her relations with native leaders. During the violence of 1890 Christie “stepped on a rusty nail which pierced shoe leather to lacerate and infect his right foot. The wound stubbornly refused to heal,” and the boy died of lockjaw (David Humphreys Miller, *Ghost Dance* [Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985] 133).

*Omeros* includes elliptically many of these details of Weldon’s history, and a number of them further the theme of the wound pursued by Ramazani. Walcott continues the tragic story of the Sioux after Sitting Bull’s death as he shows Weldon meditating on the massacre of Sioux men, women, and children in the last days of their nation—the massacre known as Wounded Knee.

See J. Mooney, *Fourteenth Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (1896); Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963); Stanley Vestal [Walter S. Campbell], *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* (Boston: Houghton, 1932); and, for Catherine Weldon’s letters, Stanley Vestal [Walter S. Campbell], ed., *New Sources of Indian History, 1850–1891* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1934).

SUSAN STEWART  
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### The MLA’s Poet Presidents

To the Editor:

Referring to James Russell Lowell’s importance to her, Sandra M. Gilbert wrote in the 1996 Presidential Address (112 [1997]: 370–79) that “unless I am doing a grave injustice to one of the 103 colleagues who held this office between his tenure and mine, I believe I am the first poet to preside over the MLA since he did” (372). In MLA history, Houston A. Baker, Jr., stands between Lowell and Gilbert. Baker, who has published three books of poetry, was included in my anthology *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African American Poetry* (1997) because he

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.

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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.