

Poetry, Scholarship, and Teaching Composition

TO THE EDITOR:

Right at the beginning of the excellent special topic on poetry, I found myself distracted by this unintentionally hilarious passage:

Finally, there is academic culture itself. The structure of English departments usually assumes a distinction between creative writing and theory. Sometimes the division is tripartite: creative writing, literature, theory. Since many poets today depend on appointments in departments of English for their sustenance, these divisions have a practical, day-by-day, lived significance. With the added distraction of teaching students which prepositions go with which verbs, many modern language departments suffer their own divisions between those who do theory and those who don't. (Bruce R. Smith, "Introduction: Some Pre_{sup}positions," 120 [2005]: 10)

Anybody who works in an English department and thinks that the trio "creative writing, literature, theory" is the division with the most "practical, day-by-day, lived significance" has had a career of truly princely privilege. That erasure, that fantastically extravagant obliviousness to the overwhelming bulk of the work that happens in English departments, colored my reading of the rest of the issue. (Bruce R. Smith, the coordinator of the special topic, at least has the grace to acknowledge the real division of labor in modern language departments, offering a nod to basic language instruction—the least prestigious and generally most miserably remunerated but by far the largest portion of the work in those departments. *Merci*.)

So as I read, the eight-hundred-pound gorilla who crowds out most everything else in my office sat atop my desk and chuckled, especially at the work of those contributors with prestigious professorships. This is not to suggest that all the contributors are necessarily unacquainted with my gorilla friend—only Smith, after all, makes a point of calling attention to his own willful blindness, his indifference to academic labor below a particular standard of prestige. But the gorilla would occasionally nudge me, count the pages of

critical and theoretical argument, then urge me to calculate the hours and hours of composition grading by graduate students, part-timers, temps, and other adjuncts in the critics' departments that made possible those fine disquisitions. The princes have the necessary time and leisure for their intellectual work (which I am not knocking!) because the peasants don't get paid much. The gorilla finds those spectacular ratios amusing.

This semester, at my community college job, four of my five classes are composition. Critical and creative writing must wait until summer. Even this letter: I have time to write it because it is now spring break. Smith's remark, written with all the innocent ignorance of unthought privilege, made me aware that for those of us at the lower tiers of the profession, including those of us with PhDs, *PMLA* fulfills almost the same function as *Martha Stewart Living*: great ideas there, but mostly we get from it the wonderful fantasy of ever having the time to do such things ourselves.

The eight-hundred-pound gorilla sits on my desk every day. He sits on the desks of the princes, too—they couldn't do their work without him. Some of the princes don't see him. And he doesn't always find it so amusing that such a large fellow can be so easily dismissed and forgotten.

James D. Sullivan
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Reply:

The anger that James D. Sullivan expresses over disparities in working conditions in the profession of English is altogether justified. The causes for these disparities, it seems to me, have less to do with the editorial policies of *PMLA* and the supposed myopia of professors in research universities than with a capitalist system that hierarchizes institutions of higher learning in this country, apportioning salaries and course loads in direct relation to tuition charges, and divides educators among themselves so as to forestall any unified confrontation with the system. I apologize for unintentionally offending Sullivan and anyone else who has to work in such demoralizing circumstances.

Sullivan's letter makes me regret that the special topic of *PMLA* didn't include more contribu-