

E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

OPENING REMARKS AT AN
MLA SESSION IN MEMORY OF
MINA SHAUGHNESSY,
DECEMBER 28, 1979¹

This session is dedicated to the memory of Mina Shaughnessy, who died last year at the height of her powers. Before introducing the reading of the papers, I have been asked to say a few words about Mina and about the appropriateness of honoring her in this way.

Only a very few years ago—here at the last San Francisco meeting of MLA—Mina came to national attention. Her now famous book, *Errors and Expectations*, was still being prepared for the press, so she was not widely known when she delivered a paper here at the first MLA session in recent memory ever to be devoted to the subject of composition. Some of you here today may have attended that session and heard Mina's unforgettable talk. The audience was large—maybe as many as 300 people in a big, crowded room. The occasion is imprinted on my mind. For all my own nervousness as the first speaker, I was nonetheless struck by Mina's beauty and bearing, and I still remember the way she made her way to the podium, moving deliberately and apparently calmly. She had just been introduced with some rather self-conscious and silly comments, and when she arrived at the dais she did something that was quite startling—she gently indicated in her first impromptu words that composition was too serious a matter to deserve such silliness. I remember my own intense gratification at that moment, when the audience burst into appreciative applause.

Then, as Mina delivered her short paper, called "Diving In," she was interrupted several times by more applause, and when

she finished she was given an ovation as prolonged and enthusiastic as any I have ever heard at MLA. People who heard that talk have told me that their lives were changed by it, that they decided then and there to go into composition professionally—to dive in. Wayne Booth came up to me afterwards to ask who *was* that person, and he later said it was the most exciting MLA session he had ever attended. That was the electrifying effect that Mina always had on those who were lucky enough to hear her speak.

Now that talk, along with Mina's pathbreaking book, is in print. Anyone who reads the text of her MLA talk will admire its humaneness and style, but probably they will not be able to grasp why we all responded on that occasion with such tremendous enthusiasm. Partly it was because Mina was a brilliantly accomplished public speaker. Partly it was because she radiated beauty and grace and a devotion to something beyond herself. Mainly, I think, it was because she projected a moral authority that was unmistakable. About this moral force, her friend Irving Howe has said: "There is a mystery here of human character, the force of true conviction—and how profoundly it can affect people as they recognize its presence. It is a kind of authority without bluster, or prophecy, or ego, or system. And as a result one wanted to please her not just personally but ethically. Her mildest disappointment was a judgment to avoid; her mildest approbation, a pleasurable reward."

For our profession there is in Mina's premature death very little consolation. The marvelous book she left us was just a beginning. Her human influence radiated out beyond the sphere of ideas and ideologies to reach people and inspire them in ways that brought out their best instincts and efforts. It's true that Mina could be impatient with composition experts who were fools or dogmatists. It's true that she was willing to take a stand on controversial issues. For instance, she had the courage to speak of errors at a time when the fashion among experts was to denounce error-hunting. But even the most ardent polemicist was disarmed by the grace of Mina's book, and in her presence extremists were moderated by what Irving Howe calls her "moral radiance." That is why her death is such an immense loss to our profession. She alone seemed to lend us a sense of community amidst our conflicting ideologies. Our understanding of that lost leadership deepens our sense of loss. We not only honor what she has done, we also mourn the loss of a human influence that is irreplaceable.

I want to mention one subject very dear to Mina which she did not get around to in her published writing. For many reasons she would have liked this subject to be mentioned at an MLA session dedicated to her memory. And that is the connection of literature—especially poetry—with composition. Mina was a lover of poetry, and was a poet herself. She saw no abyss dividing the painful efforts of the beginning writer and the highest expressions of the best poets. She saw composition and poetry as threads of one fabric. She saw literature and literacy as belonging together, not as segregated into two domains—the rich suburbs of literature and the poor slums of composition. She felt at home in both districts of our profession, and she was an integrationist. She admired the literary mandarins of the MLA and took great pleasure—amid the glow of her book's triumph—in sharing the same podium with high-powered literary intellectuals like René Girard. She deplored the thought that composition should be left to technocratic specialists who were deaf to the rhythms of literature. She welcomed the economic exigencies that brought literary scholars back to composition classes. She wanted all of God's children to be literate in the full sense, and this was also to include teachers of composition.

Mina, then, was very much at home here at the MLA, and never felt herself to be an exile belonging only in the halls of composition. For her, literacy included literature, and she had an Arnoldian sense of the continuities between them. Her fellow poet Adrienne Rich puts Mina in the tradition of Montessori, Freire, and Ivan Illich—the tradition of those who, in Rich's words, "have understood that intelligence is not determined by privilege." That is so. And Mina also stands in the tradition of Matthew Arnold—the tradition of the poet who is also an inspector of schools, of the literary intellectual who is also a teacher of punctuation—of those who see the continuities in our literate culture, and the importance that writing has in bringing out the human as well as the economic potential of every person in our democracy.

Her favorite poem happened to be by Matthew Arnold. It was "The Buried Life," a poem that is partly about the difficulty of unlocking in words what lies unexpressed within us. I want to quote some lines of it which greatly appealed to Mina, and which also convey something of her legacy:

Ah! well for us, if even we,
Even for a moment, can get free

Our heart, and have our lips unchain'd;
For that which seals them hath been deep-ordain'd!

• • •

But hardly have we, for one little hour,
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves—
Hardly had skill to utter one of all
The nameless feelings that course through our breast,
But they course on forever unexpress'd.

• • •

Only—but this is rare—

• • •

When our world-deafen'd ear
Is by the tones of a lovéd voice caress'd—
A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.
The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain,
And what we mean, we say.

The last word of this brief tribute should be Mina's, and it should be one of her own poems. I've chosen a short birthday poem that she sent to Alice Trillin—a dear friend who had successfully fought off the same kind of cancer that was afflicting Mina:

For Alice on her Fortieth Birthday, May 8, 1978

Having been through rough territory
where thistles really pierce
and cliffs loom insurmountable at times,
shading whole days,

You know that the journey into forty is just a fiction,
a line chalked across our lives because the digits change,
even though we are still stalking adventure,
still longing for our mothers,
still believing that the world is only as old as we are.
So please, beautiful girl, become forty as if
you have just skipped over a hopscotch line
and all the fun is just beginning
and ornery Time has not even thought yet
about calling you home to supper.

Note

¹This talk was given at the Modern Language Association session, December 28, 1979. Reprinted by permission.