AN ACADEMY . . . OF ARTS AND LETTERS

MERRITT Y. HUGHES

President, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters,
May 7, 1960 to May 6, 1961

Our name declares a triple faith which we share with only one other academy in this country, the Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters. In our early Transactions little space may have been given to Arts and Letters, and in that space there may have been much candid doubt about the purpose and even about the meaning of the words themselves. Though like other state academies, ours owed its birth to its founders’ confidence in Science as the servant, if not the saviour, of the commonwealth, its founders gave it a name which implies that man does not live by bread alone.

Were the founders trying to save our young economy from ever needing the warning which those words carry in the title of a recent Russian novel? It would be pleasant to think of them as trying to forestall the cultural “imbalance” which is now puzzling our efforts to overtake the Russians in scientific education. In the early Transactions there are indications of such foresight. Though they may not indicate much anxiety about the future, they do suggest wisdom in interpreting the past. Our founders may have regretted the growing imbalance in the Anglo-American tradition—the attitude towards science for which Bacon’s Advancement of Learning has been principally blamed. Our founders seem to have shared Bacon’s understanding of the importance of the imagination in both science and literature. They were not deceived by his narrowly utilitarian interpreters.

Perhaps the founders remembered that when the Royal Society was chartered by Charles II in 1662, although the “glory of God” was one of its avowed objects, the humanities were ignored in the charter. Its purpose was starkly declared to be to “promote by the authority of experiments the sciences of natural things, and of useful arts.” Of course it is a mistake to regard the founders of the Royal Society as enemies of the fine arts or of literature. With a dramatist like the Duke of Buckingham, a scientific romancer like John Wilkins (later bishop of Chester), an architect like Sir Christopher Wren, an antiquarian and essayist like John Evelyn, and an astronomically-minded Christian apologist like Bishop Seth Ward among them, the founders might assume that they themselves were

* Address of the retiring president, delivered at the 91st annual meeting of the Academy, May 6, 1961.
the great white hope of English literature. In their routine reports they expected to set that literature an example that would firmly correct its faults of style.\(^1\) But of its patronage they washed their hands. When a visiting member of the Académie Française hinted to the first historian of the Royal Society that it had a poor library, he was ready with the reply that “With Books they meddle not . . . ; their Revenue they design for Operators and not for Lecturers.”\(^2\) And when later their historian proposed that they might set up a literary academy something like the Académie Française, they turned him down. Being both more modest and more ambitious than those confident Englishmen, our founders proposed to meddle with books and to make Arts and Letters a part of their business.

With the Arts it must be confessed that they meddled very little, so little indeed as to make it a question whether our Academy has ever taken the Fine Arts seriously or ever clearly discriminated between the Useful Arts and Applied Science. From the beginning there has never been any doubt of our passionate interest in the sciences, or that we have tried hard to be interested in Letters. But in our history the record of the Arts—aside from Letters, which is an art both useful and fine—has hardly corresponded with the honor that we do them by electing a vice-president to represent them. In our original “Plan of Operations”\(^3\) Departments of the Fine and Useful Arts were projected, but the former was abandoned to a patron who could hardly be expected to take any but the most pragmatic interest in them. The “Plan” expressed the pious hope “that such relations may be established with the State Agricultural Society as, without changing . . . the independence of that organization, will constitute said Society the proposed Department of the Useful Arts: leaving the field of the Fine Arts to be filled by a newly-created Department of the Fine Arts, which it is thought may be formed very soon.

The pious hope bore withered fruit. The report of our first President to Governor Washburn\(^4\) easily demonstrated the living interest

---

\(^1\) Enough has been written about the determination of the founders of the Royal Society to chaste English writing on all its levels, including those of syntax and metaphor, and to “beat the mythologists out of the republic of letters.” The matter is well summed up by Jackson I. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones in their Introduction (p. xxv) to their edition of The History of the Royal Society, by Thomas Sprat. (St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University Studies, 1958.) If the founders could rise to read The Origin of Species, they would be delighted to find Darwin ranked by Sir Arthur Keith (in his new Introduction to its sixth Everyman edition [1928], p. xix) “with that small select group of great Englishmen which holds Shakespeare.”

\(^2\) This reply of Sprat to Samuel Sorbière is quoted by Dorothy Stimson in Scientists and Amateurs: A History of the Royal Society (New York: Henry Schuman, 1948), p. 75.

\(^3\) Bulletin of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, No. 1 (1870).

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 25.

\(^5\) Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, Vol. I (1872). President Hoyt’s Report contained a list of 141 articles on scientific subjects by residents of the state which were known to be in print in 1870 (pp. 17–25).
of our founders in the natural sciences, but nothing was said about any response by the Agricultural Society to its appointment as patron of the Useful Arts. The best that President Hoyt could say about them was that in the past they had generally been "cultivated with considerable success." Of the Fine Arts he confessed that "they had made little impression upon the life and character of the people. Architecture," he mourned, "both in the construction of private dwellings and buildings for public use, gave here, as elsewhere in our country, painful proof of a prevailing ignorance of the principles of the art."

Though a "Department of the Arts" figured in the Transactions of our first decade, it never contained more than three articles as against a score or more on the natural or social sciences. Peaks of three articles pretending to deal with the Arts, either Useful or Fine, were achieved in 1872 with the help of history and ethnography, and in 1873 entirely with the help of engineering. The first of the three titles under "Arts" in 1872 headed a two-page article on "The Production of Sulphide of Mercury by a New Process and its Use in Photography." It was followed by two papers totalling seventeen pages on "The Rural Population of England as Classified in Domesday Book" and "On the Place of the Indian Languages in the Study of Ethnology." In 1873 the now uncompromisingly useful "Department of the Arts" consisted of speculations "On Wisconsin River Improvement," "On the Strength of Materials as Applied to Engineering," and on "Railway Gauges."

In spite of an attempt to draw the attention of the annual meeting of 1876 away from "the mechanic arts, admirable as are their results," to "those arts which are called par eminence Fine Arts, or more commonly 'Art,'" the Academy could not be interested either in the Fine Arts as a part of education or in the "Mechanic Arts" from any point of view except their utility. Thirty-four years later, when President Davis analyzed the distribution of articles among what seemed to him to be the distinct fields of interest in the first thirty-six years of the Transactions, only .07% of the titles belonged under "Art." Unless we except Letters, which seem always to have been regarded by our founders as outside the "Department of the Arts," by 1907 it was submerged and forgotten. Wisely perhaps, we have resigned painting and sculpture to strong, local groups like the Madison Art Association (now over sixty years old) and the Milwaukee Friends of Art. In the years while we have been diligently developing the Junior Academy of Science under the direction of Professor John Thomson—and now under that of Pro-

---

7 By Alford Payne, S.T.D., in a paper on "Art as Education" (Transactions, IV, 32).
8 J. J. Davis in "The Academy, its Past and Future," Transactions, XV, ii (1907), 891.
fessor Jack Arndt—the mysteriously named and brilliantly succes-
sful “music clinics” have grown up independently of us on the
University campus in Madison. Without serious help from us
parallel services to artistic high school students have been emerg-
ing on the Madison campus and at many of the State Colleges.
Perhaps it is too late for the Academy to think of justifying its
profession of interest in the Fine Arts by trying to set up organi-
zations on the levels of the municipal art associations or of the
“clinics” for students on the Madison campus. It may be too late
for us to think of any over-all service to the arts throughout the
state such as is being rendered by the Wisconsin Arts Foundation
and Council from its offices in Milwaukee and Madison.
The time for leadership in the arts by the Academy may indeed
be past. Independent action on our part now might well seem to
be—and actually be—intrusion upon the work of the Wisconsin
Arts Foundation and several other organizations. Perhaps in a
society where local choruses, local semi-professional theatres, and
local private exhibitions of painting, photography, and sculpture
are widespread spontaneous growths, central support and leader-
ship in the arts may be less and less needed. It is hard to imagine
anything that the Academy could do to improve the symphonic tech-
nique or the morale of the orchestra which is one of our hosts here
in Waukesha. And yet as long as there is no truly professional
symphony orchestra anywhere in Wisconsin, and as long as almost
all our cities lack even the meanest public art displays, the Academy
can hardly be at ease with its record of indifference to the Fine
Arts.

II

On the junior level in the field of Letters it may also be true that
there is now no room for service of any kind by the Academy. In
all the eighteen years of the life of the Junior Academy of Science
no one seems to have dreamed of a Junior Academy of Letters. If
by a miracle we were to receive an endowment fully sufficient to
finance such a Junior Academy—headed by a member of the De-
partment of English or of Speech at one of the private or State
Colleges or at the University—could a leader be found to try to
build up interests in reading and writing among adolescents in num-
ers justifying regional meetings rivalling the seven established
regional meetings of the Junior Academy of Science? Could such a
leader possibly contrive programs excelling or supplementing the
existing pyramid of regional and state-wide forensic meets which
are sponsored by the Department of Speech in the University Ex-
tension? With no broader base than the Academy affords, will it
ever be possible to challenge or even in a modest way to supplement
such developments in the field of “Letters” as the Speech Institute
and the Summer High School Journalism Workshop which are to
be launched in a few weeks on the Madison campus? In the neg-
lected center of the field of “Letters” should the Academy attempt
any initiative apart from the now vigorous Wisconsin Council of
Teachers of English? On the level of a Junior Academy of Letters
it is hard to imagine any work being done which is not already
being better done by specialists. This is most obviously true in His-
tory, for our Academy itself is younger than the State Historical
Society.9 In numbers our Junior Academy of Science falls far short
of the nearly twenty-two thousand Young Historians who subscribe
to The Thirtieth Star and are challenged to compete in regional
essay contests that culminate in the award, at the annual banquet,
of prizes really commensurate with the hard work of both the con-
testants and the judges.

Policy and decency alike forbid the Academy to trespass in re-
gions which belong to the established educational agencies in a state
whose boundaries were long ago declared by the President of its
University to be no wider than those of the campus. If the Univer-
sity were to propose a literary partnership with us on the lines of
the Junior Academy of Science, we might not decline; but no such
initiative seems probable on either side. Partnership on that level
with institutions like the Historical Society and other Wisconsin
organizations awarding prizes for compositions of various kinds in
English or other languages is also hardly likely. Perhaps it might
take the form of recognition in some way by us of a few of their
top contestants. Something of that kind flanking the awards of our
Junior Science Academy at our annual meetings might help to
redress an imbalance which many of our scientific members have
long been chivalrously regretting.

III

If then we are to become in any effective way an Academy of
Letters, it must be on an adult level and in ways distinct from the
adult education which is being constantly broadened by the Uni-
versity Extension and many other agencies, private as well as pub-
ic. It must be done—I believe—on a basis of three principles. One
of them is the principle that, at least in modern times, the main

9 The senior position of the Historical Society was recognized in the Academy’s or-
iginal Plan of Operations, pp. 20–21, by a suggestion that, “with mutual advantage,” the
Academy’s Department of Letters might “be formed about the State Historical So-
ciety, should that useful and prosperous institution favor the establishment of a rela-
tion of that sort; said Society maintaining its . . . independent existence and yet ful-
filling the office of the proposed Department by an enlargement of its scope, so as to
embrace investigations in the branches properly included, and by concentrating in its
library all the works that may be accumulated by the Academy in whatever
Department.”
function of literary academies is the recognition of literary achievement. Another emerges from the fact that in the Transactions we have a small but sound inheritance of literary scholarship. The third emerges from the need in Wisconsin—as everywhere else—to create a working alliance between Science and Literature. The extraordinary thing about the three principles is that they can be put into effect without any addition to our budget or any change in our organization. They need only to be kept firmly in mind by the editors of the Transactions and the Review, and to be worked more and more effectively into the programs of our meetings and into the imagination of many people who ought to be interested in the Academy and perhaps have not even heard of it.

Recognition of literary achievement by prizes is beyond our resources and would hardly be possible even if we had an endowment equal to the Nobel funds in Stockholm. It would, of course, be a great pleasure if we could help serious young writers by “crowning” their really outstanding work as the Académie Française does in about a score of cases year by year. To undertake anything of the kind would require both a formidable tradition like that which is maintained by the French Academy and a force of technical assistants costing much more than the value of the awards that would be made. To be of any real importance the awards would have to be absolutely distinct from the scholarships which are made in ever increasing numbers by schools and Foundations to encourage young writers of “promise.” Even if awards were restricted to authors having some vital connection with Wisconsin, the standard would have to approximate that of a national literary Hall of Fame. Whether we liked it or not, in awarding them we should be setting ourselves up as a kind of literary tribunal dedicated—as Matthew Arnold said in “The Literary Influence of Academies”¹⁰—to maintaining standards giving “the law, the tone to literature, and that tone a high one.”

The responsibilities and pretensions of a literary tribunal may be unavoidable by any official organization calling itself an Academy of Letters. Certainly we ought not to try to avoid them. Yet we are in no position to assume them with an authority even remotely resembling that of the French Academy, of the Royal Society of Literature, or of the Royal Society of Canada. If ever we are in such a position, it can only be by some almost unimaginable change in the level of culture throughout the state. But at our annual meetings it is easily within our power as we are to add to the critical reputation of writers of real worth, minor as well as major, living as well as dead. It is strange that August Derleth’s Still Small Voice

was not anticipated by any criticism of Zona Gale in our Transactions. Stranger still is the silence there about the Son of the Middle Border, though it may be no stranger than the facts that his manuscripts are in the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California, and that our two biographies of Hamlin Garland should both have been published by University Presses outside of Wisconsin. Yet in the Transactions we have had analyses of some minor Wisconsin writers, such as the study of Margaret Ashmun by Julia Grace Wales.

IV

In a multi-national world any limitation of interest to the literature of an area no larger than our state is impossible for a publication of world-wide exchange like that of our Transactions. And in a society with as much interest as ours has had, and with changing motives still has, in the literature of the past and its interpretation, an Academy of Letters is naturally concerned—perhaps too much concerned—with antiquity. At the outset the "Department of Letters" in the Transactions typically consisted of only one or two "Studies in Comparative Grammar" like the short paper on "Some Weak Verbs in the Germanic Dialects" which alone represented it in Volume II. That little investigation of the development of a few Gothic strong verbs into weak ones did well if it got as large an audience as presumably listened to the most specialized of the twenty-three scientific papers in that Volume, Dr. P. R. Hoy's description of the water puppy. Over-specialized and remote from the larger issues of life though the little study in comparative grammar may have been, it represented a valid curiosity about language which incidentally linked the author to philologists in all the great universities of the world. For him and for them it had a beauty no less lovely than Dr. Hoy saw in his water puppy—"a most beautiful object, as it appears in its favorite surroundings, with the long scarlet plumose gills, continually waving backwards and forwards."

The slow relaxation of the grip of historical philology upon the "Department of Letters" in our Transactions betrays its dependence upon the men teaching languages in the University and upon the fashions of scholarship in the late nineteenth century. Mis-guided though the fashions may seem to us now, they helped to keep the Academy aware of widening horizons in literary history.

---

12 Transactions, XXXIV (1942), 221–30.
13 By J. B. Fueling, Professor of Comparative Philology, in the University of Wisconsin.
14 "Water Puppy (Menobranchus lateralis say)." By P. R. Hoy, M.D. Pp. 248–50.
The progress is hard to chart because the papers published in that “Department” were either very few, or—with increasing numbers—they became miscellaneous and remote from any literary or philological interest. The few with a fair claim to be printed there Ανάφωσις of Shakespeare” and, in an article on “The Vocabulary of show philology chaperoning literature in studies like “The Ανάφωσις of Shakespeare” by the same writer twenty-five years later, being lured within distant sight of modern esthetic studies of the vocabularies of the poets.

Still moving in traditional channels of academic literary scholarship in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and still almost monopolized by men from the modern language departments at the University, the little current of literary studies became less specialized as it slowly broadened on its way through the sea of increasingly specialized scientific articles in the Transactions. In many of our papers in all fields over-specialization may have been a vice. But charges of that kind are most readily made by audiences whose interests are themselves too narrow. A glance back at the series of medieval and Chaucerian studies which Karl Young contributed to the Transactions before his translation from our University to Yale shows not merely a national scholarly reputation in the making but also a foundation being laid for our most recent illuminations of Chaucer’s poetry against its whole literary and cultural background.

On the basis of Karl Young’s papers it would be absurd to boast that in the twenties the Transactions made a major contribution to American scholarship. So on the basis of Ruth Wallerstein’s study of “Cowley as a Man of Letters” it would be absurd to think that in the thirties the Academy took a leading part in the extension of interest in the “Metaphysical Poets” to their heir who narrowly missed being elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. The important thing for the Academy is the fact that its programs have often included literary studies which were scholarly by the strictest academic standards and at the same time had an obvious bearing on the main developments in the literature of the past.

The literature of the past has had at least its full share of attention from the Academy. For this the influence of the universities has been partly responsible, but to that same influence our recent programs owe dissections of the plays of two prominent American dramatists, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, essays on con-
temporaries like Camus, Valère Larbaud and Samuel Beckett, and at least one discussion of a debatable aspect of modern poetry. In recent volumes of the Transactions the increasing majority of studies of contemporary writers seems to show that our liveliest interest is in the literature of the present.

The only literature that we neglect is that of the future, which in the past it has been the professed purpose of the great literary academies to foster and mould. That task the Academy has never seriously considered. On the level of help to writers young or old by prizes or scholarships the way is not open. On that of guidance for amateur writers we can only leave the responsibility to the creative writing seminars. In their encouragement we cannot compete with the poetry societies or offer a medium of publication that could possibly serve them as well as do the better poetry magazines, one of the best of which is published no further away than Beloit.

The best service within our power to the literature of both the present and the future lies most surely in more criticism of contemporary writers like that which has been slowly emerging in the Transactions. More and more of it is likely to seek us out. Three or four newspapers in the state are extending the audience for such criticism and helping to raise its standards. Rising enrolments in the University and State Colleges are fast increasing the staffs of modern language teachers eager to write such criticism. With the multiplication of advanced courses in literature in the hands of young men in the State Colleges in ranks often superior to those of men of comparable training in the University, critical scholarship of the best kind in many fields should be increasingly offered to us from all over the state. The amount may force us to find a literary assistant for the Editor of the Transactions. If the final results are not good, we shall have only ourselves to blame.

V

The great problem, of course, is to redress the imbalance between our interests in Science and Letters. It has always existed—less because the planners of our programs have been partial than because for many years practically no papers were offered for the "Department of Letters." Only by extension to offerings from sociology, anthropology, political science, and ethics could the caption be justified, and before the turn of the century it was dropped. In his analysis of everything which had been published in the Transactions, XLIX (1960), 218-218.

---

23 By J. J. Davis in Transactions, XV, ii (1907), 891.
actions down to 1906 President Davis found that only 18% could be classed under "Letters." By including papers in "Social and Political Science" the percentage rose to 33%. It became customary to lump those sciences with Letters under the term "Humanities." Some hardly humane wars were fought between partisans of the remote antiquity and the almost immediate contemporaneity of the Indian mounds. Some strange appeals to physiology and chivalry were made by both sides in the battle over women's rights. The problems of control of the railways and the "trusts" were solved more by faith than by knowledge of law or economics, and the state's obligations to its schools, its criminals, and the insane were treated with a speculative assurance that seems sadly unscientific today.

In spite of the embarrassing rhetoric and confused thinking on some of the pages dealing with what President Davis called "Social and Political Science," there were some solid papers on ethics. From an early discussion\(^\text{22}\) of the mind's constraints upon its own liberty by the President of the University to Professor Frank Sharp's analysis\(^\text{23}\) of "The Personal Equation in Ethics" the approach was psychologically realistic. On the level of public morals it often was learnedly and earnestly realistic in articles like Charles N. Gregory's on "Political Corruption and English and American Laws for its Prevention."\(^\text{24}\)

In the studies which President Davis roughly described as "humanistic" a kind of true civic humanism was being worked out. Its effect upon our programs was felt first in the matter of forest conservation but—as President Davis sadly remarked—with no visible effect upon public policy. Some of its features were to emerge later in the noble but vague "Wisconsin Idea." In the Transactions it sometimes had Utopian overtones, but it was chastened by the standards of the scientific articles. Even in the wishful realm of geology those standards never fell, though a geologic survey of the state was the Academy's first enterprise. They stood firm from our earliest, unhopeful reports of precious metals to the grimly humorous treatment of the record of die-hard faith in them by our lately lost State Geologist, Ernest F. Bean. In the philosophy of our civic humanism the natural sciences have been a discipline quite as much as they have been a Baconian genie promising that by hitching our wagons to stars we can squeeze unlimited wealth out of nature.

If in reading old volumes of the Transactions we are sometimes puzzled by the confused roles of Sciences and Letters, there may be

\(^{22}\) "Freedom of Will Empirically Considered" in Transactions, VI (1885), 2-29.

\(^{23}\) Transactions, X (1894), 310-326.

\(^{24}\) Transactions, X (1894), 262-297.
comfort for us in looking back for a moment at their confusion by the ancestor of all modern academies, the French Academy which flourished in the reign of Henri III under the leadership of the poet Jean-Antoine de Baiff, nearly a century before the founding of the Royal Society. Its philosophy was Platonic and owed much to the Neo-Platonic academic tradition in Italy. Its doctrine was the belief that poetry, the queen of all sciences and arts, could be cultivated only by men of universal knowledge. One of its manifestoes describes a symbolic Temple of the Arts where Aristotle displays them all to the patroness of the Academy, Marguerite of Savoy. Though Poetry is their queen, the seven arts are led by Military Science. Rhetoric comes third and Grammar only fifth. Between them march Medicine and Architecture. The last is Agriculture. Though in this strange hierarchy the sciences do not seem to rank high, the interest in them was great. In the correspondence of some of the leaders— all of them poets—scientific interests constantly emerge. Their great concern was with cosmography or astronomy, and the main weight of evidence shows pretty clearly that they were on the side of Copernicus in the debate in which so many Englishmen—including Francis Bacon—were against him.

In naming their Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, our founders preserved more than a trace of the belief of Henri III’s academicians that the disciplines are mutually indispensable. That faith forever needs reaffirmation. In a specialized world where scientists in different subdivisions of their fields cannot always understand one another, the reaffirmation of that faith is more and more necessary. James Bryant Conant’s book On Understanding Science might well be prescribed reading for scientists as well as for humanists. The response of the humanities to science in poetry and fiction might also be the basis of some widely prescribed reading of primary and secondary material. Of the latter Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s The Breaking of the Circle might be suggested for scientists. An example in our Transactions is Harry H. Clark’s “The Role of Science in the Thought of W. D. Howells.” The situation is not helped by the revolt against the scientists and their “myths” by several only too representative living poets who have suffered con-

---


dign punishment in Joseph Warren Beach’s *Obsessive Images.*\(^{31}\) What is needed is an initiation for all of us in both Science and Letters. To that good end the programs of our annual meetings can help in a small way—but only if we succeed much better than our founders and leaders have yet done in trying to make the Academy justify its name.