

The Literary Influence
of Academies

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READING through the notes I had made for this occasion, I perceive that what I have really prepared is not so much a lecture as a sermon. In this I have perhaps unconsciously fulfilled an ambition which I had as a child, to rival my father who was a Presbyterian minister. But if you think it out of place for me to preach you a sermon, perhaps you will have the indulgence to think of me somewhat in the character of Balaam's ass. The prophet, you remember, had disobeyed the Lord and was stopped on his impious journey by his she-ass, who warned him of the angel with a sword who stood in the midst of the path. There are three things that it is well to remember about Balaam's ass and three good reasons for treating her with indulgence: she only preached once; although of the female sex she did not preach long; and though divinely inspired, she was, after all, only an ass.

The title of my talk, 'The Literary Influence of Academics', is of course that of a famous essay by Matthew Arnold, which appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* a little over a hundred years ago.¹ It is the substance of a lecture which Arnold, as Professor of Poetry, had delivered at Oxford two months earlier. I am not presuming to bend the bow of Ulysses, in annexing Arnold's title; indeed the essay is not one of his best performances; but it raises some interesting questions as to the functions and effects of an Academy, should the English think fit to found one—a subject then a matter of some discussion—and the points raised by Arnold seemed to me appropriate to reconsider in relation to our newly-founded Australian Academy on the occasion of this, its first general meeting. If I speak only about literature, it is because this is my province and because I should hesitate to hold forth on the other humanities in the presence of the experts and scholars assembled here.

Arnold's essay is a curious one. His main theme is the possible benefits that might accrue if England were to establish an Academy on the model of the *Académie Française*, that is to say, as Arnold explains in a short review of the founding and the history of the French Academy, a body entrusted with two main tasks, the preservation, purification and regulation of the language, on the one hand and, on the other, the operation of a literary tribunal capable of passing judgement on new works of literature and maintaining standards of taste and beauty. In addition it would examine and judge 'works already published, whether by living or dead authors, and literary matters in general'. The benefits to the intellectual life of England, Arnold argues, would be immense; for by counteracting the prevailing faults of the English mind, slovenly thinking and provincialism of outlook and taste, an Academy would act as a public conscience in matters of literature. The French mind, he thinks, differs from the English precisely in the possession of such a conscience and he quotes Sainte-Beuve: 'In France the first consideration for us is not whether we are amused and pleased by a work of art or mind, nor is it whether we are

¹ *Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. X, August 1864, 154-72.

touched by it. What we seek above all to learn is whether *we were right* in being amused with it, and in applauding it, and in being moved by it'. The English, Arnold believes, rarely ask themselves this question. They are consequently at the mercy of fashion and apt to be pleased without just cause. For lack of this discipline even writers of genius often lapse into triviality, bad taste and intellectual parochialism.

At this stage in his argument, when he seems on the point of firmly advocating an English Academy, to use a delightful phrase of our day, Arnold 'chickens out'. He dismisses the whole idea as foreign to the genius of the English people whose characteristic is *energy* as that of the French is *intellect*.

And what that energy, which is the life of genius, above everything demands and insists upon is freedom; entire independence of all authority, prescription, and routine, the fullest room to expand as it will. Therefore a nation whose chief spiritual characteristic is energy, will not be very apt, to set up in intellectual matters, a fixed standard, an authority like an academy.

To complete the unconscious comedy of his performance, Arnold, having dismissed the idea of an English Academy, then proceeds for the rest of the essay to set up his own by considering and condemning the provincial lapses of taste in passages chosen from English writers from Addison and Burke down to his contemporaries Palgrave and Kinglake. The selection both of authors and quotations seems quite arbitrary and the demonstration, if that is what it is meant to be, of the prevailing faults of English writing, is so scrappy as to be lacking in any conviction. Perhaps with a sense of this, he concludes that 'an academy quite like the French Academy . . . we shall hardly have, and perhaps we ought not to wish to have it'.

Yet if the essay as a whole is incoherent and eccentric, Arnold raises clearly, and with the common sense that usually marks his thinking, questions which seem to me entirely relevant to the use and the functions of an academy such as ours, established, among other things, to promote and foster the study and the practice of literature in Australia. He is right in concluding that its care should be chiefly devoted to two things: the condition of the native language and the standards of literary production. It is on these two functions of an academy that I should like to offer some reflections and suggestions.

I am not overlooking the fact that the French Academy, which is Arnold's exemplar, is in its constitution and membership a very different institution from the one we have just formed here in Australia. Arnold has in mind a body of writers. Ours is mainly a body of scholars and critics. For example there are some twenty-two professors of literature among our members and hardly any representatives of the art of writing itself, not a single novelist or dramatist, though Australia has writers eminent in both fields. It is true that there are four poets of some reputation in the world, but three of these owe their election mainly to the fact that they are also professors of literature, and only one to the fact that she is an outstanding poet. Or, to look outside my own bailiwick for a moment, we have four persons distinguished as art critics and art historians

and not a single painter. Yet I suppose Australia's reputation in the world of art today rests mainly on the fact that she has so many brilliant painters of world reputation. To Matthew Arnold such an academy might well have been described in terms of Prince Hal's comment on Falstaff's tavern menu: 'one halfpennyworth of bread to this intolerable deal of sack!'

The reply, I know, is that the aims and purposes of this Academy, as set out in its Royal Charter, are for the most part the fostering of scholarship and research in the humanities. The articles of incorporation nowhere specifically mention the encouragement of the creative arts themselves. And this is a fair reply. But it leaves a certain doubt in my mind. This doubt arises when one asks the question: By what means can an academy of the humanities make effective its purpose to foster and promote the humanities, to maintain standards and to influence practice, taste and public opinion? It has no judicial function. It may express opinions. It may suggest reforms and propose measures; but it cannot and should not be able to apply sanctions. This was a lesson that the French Academy learned early in its history and it is an amusing and instructive example.

Shortly after its foundation this Academy was invited to legislate on a matter of literary taste. About 1637 Pierre Corneille's famous drama *Le Cid* appeared on the stage and aroused a storm of controversy. Cardinal Richelieu invited his newly-formed Academy—it had only received its letters patent in that same year—to pronounce on the matter. It met, deliberated and produced a formidable document: *Opinions of the Académie Française on the Tragedy of the Cid*. Corneille was condemned for not having observed the classical unities and the Aristotelian rules for a dramatic poem, for having transgressed the proprieties of literary diction and for failing to observe the standards of conduct and expression expected of characters at the level of high tragedy. The Academy was probably right. Corneille had done all these things, but they were irrelevant to the fact that he had produced a work which is now recognized as one of the masterpieces of the French stage. Moreover, the supreme literary tribunal had passed judgement but it was powerless to put its judgement into effect. The public simply ignored them and the play, which had got off to a bad start, continued to draw larger and larger audiences. Ten years later to the credit of the Academicians, and probably acting on the principle of 'if-you-can't-beat-them, join-them', they elected Corneille to a vacant seat on their Academy.

The plain fact is that by far the most important way in which a body like this can hope to influence public opinion and public taste is by commanding such respect that its opinions are listened to and sought for. If its prestige is high, it will be effective, otherwise not. And this prestige will depend on the eminence of its members in their professions both individually and collectively. In humanities like history, philosophy and language it is the high distinction of scholars in their fields that commands this respect. But the doubt I mentioned a while ago, refers to the fields of literature and the fine arts. Speaking as a professor myself, I cannot help feeling that professors, however eminent, are middle-men. The community is likely to pay much more attention to authors

and artists of high repute, than to the scholars and critics who study them. For this reason the literary influence and prestige of an academy will, it seems to me, be higher and more effective, if the public is aware that the best writers of a nation are associated with its best scholars and critics in one body with a common aim and purpose. It will be more readily convinced that its academy, supported by public money, is really presided over by the Muses themselves and not merely by the nursemaids and handmaids of culture. It is for this reason that I am more than cheered by the policy of this Academy of electing persons eminent in the arts as well as others eminent for scholarship. The presence of Judith Wright, a poet of world reputation and elected for that reason, seems to me a happy augury for the future of this Academy.

But if the individual distinction of its members is the foundation of the prestige of such a body, its collective actions are nearly as important. Immortals who do nothing, like the gods of Lucretius, will perhaps command respect, but they will not have much influence. If they go about things the wrong way, the public will ignore them as the French ignored their Academy's judgement on Corneille. The second part of my talk will be concerned with ways and means by which this body might exert a real and a proper influence on the language and the literature of our country.

Looking through the list of objects and purposes of this Academy as set out in the Charter of incorporation, I note that we are to advance knowledge of the humanities, to encourage scholarship, to keep up relations with similar bodies abroad, to help humanists of distinction from other countries to visit us and our own scholars to travel abroad, to foster research and to assist and promote the building up of library collections. These are all proper, useful and necessary functions. But as far as the Arts are concerned they are not enough. They are operations behind the scenes. That egg from which we lately hatched ourselves by a remarkable feat of mystical self-propagation, The Australian Humanities Research Council, has been quietly and effectively doing all these things for a number of years. I doubt if it achieved much of a public image outside the universities. Now that we have chosen to call ourselves an Academy the public is entitled to expect something more of us. We shall be expected not only to *serve*, as we have done, but to *lead*; not only to trim the lamp, but to shine and show the light. And this can only be done by the kinds of public action which draw attention to themselves in public, other than those which foster and promote behind the scenes. We are required now, I think, to tread the stage ourselves.

One of the first activities of the French Academy after its foundation was to undertake a dictionary of the French language, a dictionary whose purpose was not merely to record usages but to pronounce on what was acceptable in educated and literary use and what was not. The Academy took this task very seriously. One of the very few occasions on which it has expelled one of its members, was when Furetière jumped their claim by publishing a dictionary of his own. The *Dictionary* of the Academy has been an authority of immense importance to French life and literature and has in its turn increased the

authority and prestige of the Academy itself. Our own Academy has, as one of its first major enterprises, the creation of a Dictionary of Australian English. It is in itself an enterprise of the first importance but, for me, it is even more important as a sign that this body is prepared to give a lead, to assume a public responsibility for the native language.

Yet a dictionary, especially a dictionary prepared by modern lexicographers, can be little more than a record of usage and meaning. It does not and probably should not try to pronounce on matters of taste; moreover as it deals mainly with single words and phrases it gives no guide to the proprieties of words used in continuing composition. Something more is needed of us in order to combat that erosion and distortion of the language which is going on all around us today. An academy which took its charter seriously, would, I think, try to give a positive lead against these tendencies.

They are not to be found in common speech, in slang and uneducated idiom which have so often been the bugbears of those concerned with the preservation of the language in the past. Language is never in real danger from a lively and inventive popular speech. The slang of one generation is usually forgotten by the next and a book like *They're a Weird Mob* shows how rich and delightful our popular speech can be. Indeed the tendency today is, if anything, in the opposite direction, towards a colourless and lifeless prose from which the energy of popular idiom has been carefully distilled away. No, the main threat to the language comes from the top and it comes mainly from our own academic communities, from the appalling jargon in which so many economists, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, linguistic scientists and so on, feel themselves bound to write. Here is an example taken almost at random from a current Australian journal published by one of the social sciences. The author is talking about what sorts of people go to church and why:

If behavioural dimensions only are examined, there is another recent theoretical development that offers an explanation of contemporary patterns of high status religiosity. Lenski has suggested that high status individuals have a high level of church participation because they are more likely than low status individuals to be involved in secular organisations. He found that lower status individuals tended to be family and kin oriented.

People who write like that suffer from two delusions: that to use this sort of language is to be 'scientific', and that they cannot be scientific without it. Nothing, I think, would be lost and much would be gained if the writer had used such ordinary English as the following:

If one looks only at the way people behave rather than at what they believe, another recent theory would explain why people on higher incomes take so much part in church life. Lenski has suggested that such people go to church more often than those on lower incomes, because they more often join other organisations outside the churches. Whereas he found that people of lower social standing go to church mainly for family reasons.

The danger of this sort of language is that it does not stay safely quarantined

in the pages of specialist books and journals. It gets into the press; it gets into the more popular books written for general educated readers. It pours into our very homes by way of those great sewers, radio and television. It becomes a debased currency which in the end corrupts and drives out ordinary usage.

I am not revealing any dark secrets in commenting on this. We all know about this corruption of the language and many protests have been heard in the past fifty years, including those from those social scientists themselves who prefer to write native English. The reason I raise the question is to put another: What should an academy concerned for the health of the language do about it? It is for you to find ways and means. Certainly I think it our duty to undertake the delicate task of trying to get bodies like the Social Science Research Council and the Academy of Science to take a stand, frame a policy and help them to carry it out. A not entirely frivolous suggestion of my own would be to publish a yearly anthology of the worst-written articles in the social sciences with a translation into plain English on the opposing pages. And we could do a lot to set our own house in order. The disease is not confined to the social sciences. I could have quoted you equally revolting specimens of learned gobble-dy-gook from contemporary literary critics who enjoy world reputations in their professions.

I have chosen one example, from many possible ones, of the sort of problem in relation to which an academy could use its prestige and standing to give a lead in preserving the language. I shall end by choosing another from literature. This is the enormous proliferation of literary criticism in this age, demanded and fostered by education, particularly university education. For every author who writes a book of any merit there are a thousand professors ready to write books about his book. I am not speaking about bad criticism, but about criticism good enough to deserve attention. There is just too much of it; which is one reason why I feel a shiver down my spine when I read in our charter that we are to encourage and promote more of it. The problem is strictly comparable to and arises from the same sorts of cause as the pollution of streams by detergents, the air of cities by exhaust fumes, and the food we eat by chemical pesticides. In both cases an invention or product used in moderate amounts becomes a menace when used indiscriminately by large populations or on too large a scale. In former times when universities were few and the numbers of students small the ecology was balanced. The enormous increase in the demand for teachers, and the consequent demand for publication as a means of choosing teachers, has upset it so badly that literature is in serious danger of being swamped by its own by-products. Readers who have been trained at universities, or respond to the influence of critical attitudes propagated by universities, find themselves caught up in the minute analysis of problems of style and structure, the anatomy and physiology of symbolism and meaning. We have advanced the study of literature in much the same way as biology, medicine and psychology have advanced the study of the human constitution. It has been a real advance in knowledge. But we have failed to ask whether it was the sort of knowledge useful past a certain point to readers and writers. The reader

who has gone through this discipline is apt to find himself in the position of a man looking forward with delight to a good dinner and finding that it has already been eaten, predigested and regurgitated for him. Works of art so thoroughly explored and assessed leave him nothing to explore for himself, no excitement of discovery, no sense of the mysterious wrestle with the angel, which the experience of literature should be. Writers who have trained at universities and who, alas, often then go on to teach at universities, become self-conscious in ways that they should not. They are like an expectant mother who has been taught to believe that she cannot have a baby unless she can pass an examination in advanced embryology. The lady is safe enough. Not the writer. Nature does not work in this way for the writer of a novel or a poem. Good writing should be done by feeling one's way, by letting the thing work on its own account, by a willingness to adventure and take risks. Style and symbol come of their own account by practice and a sort of primitive bushcraft. The fable of the centipede who walked perfectly well until he was asked how he knew which of his hundred legs he put forward first is very apt in this situation.

In addition I am sometimes struck in reading a famous modern critic like Northrop Frye or Wilson Knight, that they are exploiting writers rather than serving them. They seem to be mainly engaged in creating a rich, intricate critical *persona* for themselves, using Blake or Shakespeare as their raw material.

This, it seems to me, is an example of the sort of problem that an academy should be prepared to tackle if it is to take a leading part and not simply to serve in the wings of the theatre. It should not only promote the study of literature, it should exert a discipline on that study when it tends to get out of hand. What we urgently need is some form of critical birth control—The Pill for Critics.

How it is to be done I do not know. One simple suggestion I have already made: that our members should include more eminent writers and—dare I say it?—fewer eminent professors; that it should be a forum where the primary producers should confront the middle-men in their counsels and work with them on more equal terms than is the case at present.

But speaking both as a professor and as a poet, I am sure of one thing. The literary influence of an academy can only be effective if its members are prepared to be daring, controversial, enterprising and imaginative, to take up large and important issues, to pronounce on them clearly and firmly, and to advance the light by showing it themselves.

Thank you for listening to my sermon: if I may put my text last (it comes from the gospel of St Matthew), it is:

By their fruit ye shall know them.