

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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IN the negotiations which led to the foundation of the British Academy it was felt that a national institution was needed to represent 'Literary Science', which was defined as 'the sciences of language, history, philosophy, and antiquities, and other subjects, the study of which is based on scientific principles but which are not included under the term "Natural Science"'. A stickler for logic might claim that this definition is circular, if not faulty. Despite its positive air, it is in fact negative, and when it speaks of 'Literary Science' it means any Science which is not 'Natural', and since it does not say what 'Natural Science' is, we are left in the dark. It would not be quite fair to answer that in 1900, when the words were composed, Natural Science was, quite simply, anything which came within the scope of the Royal Society, and 'Literary Science' anything which did not. This is true enough, but it is not the whole truth. The definition upon which we base our activities has more to it than an historical situation. We all know that, while one branch of knowledge is concerned with the physical nature of the universe and of everything in it, another branch is concerned with the behaviour and the achievements of mankind. It may seem a little parsimonious to label this vast field of study as 'Literary Science', but it is not unjust. Any inquiry in it relies in the first place on words, and that is why it is 'Literary'; equally any inquiry in it should be quite as strict and critical as in natural science, and that is why it deserves the name of 'Science'. Our founding fathers, in their desire to find a fair summary of a whole world of knowledge, saw its outlines clearly and recognized from the start its distinctive character and its appropriate methods. If on one side they excluded Natural Science, on the other side they excluded the practice of the creative arts. In this too they were right. The Fellows of the British Academy were not to be artists but literary scientists, engaged in the pursuit of knowledge in an enormous field, on which the only limitation is that it is confined to the works of men.

At the start it was clearly impossible to forecast what the main areas of such a field would or should be, and the original statement was wise to content itself with specifying examples such as

'language, history, philosophy, and antiquities', thus leaving the door open for new developments which would be entirely acceptable so long as they conformed to the main principles of character and method. But in practice something more definite was needed, if only to enable the Academy to carry out its functions, and from the start it has been divided into Sections, each of which has for its care a special, recognized, and recognizable sphere of learning. The number of these has been increased with the emergence of new branches of research, and there are now eleven. In the main they match the chief fields of work that exist in our universities, and this is reasonable enough when we consider how many of our Fellows are active members of universities, and how in general the pattern of learning in a country is a reflection of what happens in them. They are our chief, perhaps our only permanent, source of supply for scholars, and though their first business is to teach, they cannot teach unless they also learn. The British Academy represents at a high level the work that is done by scholars over a very large field, and if it is to perform its tasks properly, it must operate through its Sections, since it is their members who, through their shared experience and knowledge, know what is happening in a given subject and are competent to advise and help in its promotion. If the Sections were fewer in number and each had a wider scope, they might be less useful because too many members would not be in touch with important parts of a large field; if they were more numerous and each were more specialized, there is a danger that original scholars, breaking into new territories, might be neglected and find no place in our counsels. By and large, our constitution is framed on wise lines and enables us to keep our main objectives in sight without losing our grip on the multifarious activities which are our concern and call for individual attention and assistance.

At the same time we must recognize that the distinction between Sections is not inherent in the scheme of things and should not be expected to endure for eternity. On the whole our record shows that we are conscious of this and have recognized it by the creation of new Sections, of which the most recent is that concerned with the History of Art. But it is a matter which we must always watch, since it may have grave repercussions on much that is our intimate duty. On it the universities provide something very like a warning. They are organized into Faculties, each of which has its own defined field of study. This makes both for convenience and efficiency, and has much to be said for

it. Inside such a Faculty there may be little to criticize and much to admire. If the staff is large enough and good enough, a wide range of study can be taught, branches hitherto neglected receive due care, new movements and new ideas attract consideration. No doubt this is an ideal, but it is an ideal towards which actual practice may aspire in setting its standards. But for this degree of competence within a Faculty, a price must often be paid, and we must not shrink from recognizing it. The more efficient a Faculty is, the more likely it is to neglect anything that does not fall strictly within its province. Teachers trained to do one thing will not normally wish to do another; students well founded in their own discipline will shirk the risk of looking beyond it, for fear of failure in their careers. Now this may seem to be outside the scope of such a body as the British Academy, but it is not, for the good reason that the range of studies at our universities is a powerful factor in determining their scope in the whole country, and this is what concerns the Academy. It has no powers to dictate, and not many to help, but it can encourage, and where encouragement is needed, it must not be shirked. We must therefore look at certain consequences which follow from the existence of Faculties at universities and ask whether they are always healthy and beneficial to the general cause of learning.

At the outset we may note that it is unhealthy for a subject to be confined for long within fixed limits and for its students to be discouraged from looking beyond them. On this point a profitable lesson may be drawn from classical studies in this country not too long ago. Their scope was strictly circumscribed, and inside high standards were maintained. Scholars knew the ancient languages remarkably well, but were not given much encouragement to know them except for their own special sake. The tasks most honoured were the critical editing of texts, the compilation of commentaries, and the writing of Greek and Latin composition. All these were valuable instruments of study, but its end, which is to recapture as far as we can the living experience of the Greco-Roman world, was not considered of much significance, and even literary judgements on works so carefully studied were sometimes of an alarming innocence. The discipline was good, but it was not conducive to the expansion of learning, and those who attempted this were regarded with some suspicion. The situation was altered very much for the better by the recognition of the part which could be played by what were thought ancillary subjects such as history and archaeology, and the Greeks and Romans are now, on the whole, studied

as they really were and not as arbitrarily selected models of literary behaviour. Nor have the perils of inbreeding been confined to the classics. They are liable to appear in any field where so much work has been done within a field that it is difficult to, say anything new, and the law of diminishing returns begins to operate with brutal severity against research. In such circumstances it is only natural for scholars to confine themselves to examining what other scholars have said, to comparing and criticizing their views, to compiling bibliographies of what has been written rather than to attempting something new. Such a situation may give a certain austere dignity to a field of work as it becomes more difficult, but it will hardly add much to knowledge in any serious sense. The discipline provided remains an admirable instrument of education just because it calls for an unusual degree of concentration and judgement, but in polishing the instrument scholars are in danger of forgetting for what uses it was forged.

Just as new life was injected into the classics by the extension of their field to include other related subjects, so, when similar forms of scholasticism seem likely to hamper the free development of a branch of study, much can be done by looking beyond its existing boundaries. At no period has the study of history been so thoroughly pursued as it is today, and so much is being done that it seems churlish to ask for more. Yet it is noticeable that much research is confined to matters which have already been studied with some care, while other fields, which offer enormous possibilities, remain neglected. Now that Western Europe is no longer regarded as the centre of the world and the source of all its achievements, there is much to be said for studying what has happened outside it, if only that Europeans may see Europe itself in a different perspective. For this the times are highly propitious. The Chinese are publishing at a remarkable rate diaries, official papers, and archives which were, till quite lately, lost in decaying palaces or jealously guarded from peering eyes. In Istanbul the libraries of the great mosques contain a huge mass of material which has hardly been subjected to even the most perfunctory survey. The history of Africa has hitherto been confined almost to European records, but local traditions contain much of high interest in oral legends which clamour for collection before they are destroyed by the assimilation of Western ways. The Russians are generously co-operative in throwing their rich archives open to foreign scholars, and even a small knowledge of Russian provides an entry not merely

into many departments of Russian history but into fascinating sources of information gathered by Russian scholars about the peoples of Soviet Asia. A young scholar, who wishes to gather a fruitful harvest, can hardly do better than learn one or two languages outside the usual round, and through them study these largely untouched and unexamined areas. The sturdy growth of historical study has prepared it for these new adventures, and, just because it provides so good a training at university level, it is better equipped to prepare scholars to move into rather different fields as they advance from training to their own inquiries.

The growth of a field of study may mean that in extending its limits it invades territory which by convention belongs to another. This is particularly relevant to the study of literature. We no longer regard even the most famous books as masterpieces existing in an isolated world of their own splendour; we insist that they can be fully understood only if they are set against their historical background and explained as part of history in the widest sense. Yet we have not thought out all the consequences to which this leads us. The comparative study of literature, which is highly honoured in France and the United States, hardly exists in Great Britain, except in the meagre and subordinate matter of influences which one country has on another. Yet the great revolution in Homeric studies which is connected with the name of Milman Parry could hardly have taken place if courageous and independent scholars like the Chadwicks had not seen that oral recitation, which explains so many Homeric peculiarities, can be examined as a living art in many parts of the world. Nor have most schools of modern languages yet faced the hard fact that even the most original literary genius may owe much to forces which lie far from the scope of pure literature. To study German poetry without German philosophy, Greek poetry without Greek art, French medieval literature without French miniature-painting and stained glass, is to blind us to much that is not merely illuminating but indispensable to a full understanding of these difficult and complex subjects. Conversely, the remarkable growth in this century of the History of Art would not have been possible if scholars had not paid the most searching attention to a whole range of documents which cover most activities of the human spirit. Moreover, if new discoveries are to be properly exploited, they impose new demands. The decipherment of the Mycenaean tablets by Michael Ventris was indeed an astonishing feat of scholarship, but their

interpretation calls not merely for intense linguistic study but also for a knowledge of social and political conditions in the whole Near East in the thirteenth century B.C. The beginnings of poetry in Spain and France have long been a battlefield for contending theories, but all alike have now been discredited by the discovery of songs composed in early Spanish but written in Hebrew or Arabic script. Such discoveries are not peripheral but central and demand the revision of some of our methods if we are to make a productive use of them.

Other subjects, of more or less recent growth, have come into existence not by the extension of familiar fields but by cutting across them. Sociology is perhaps unlucky in its hybrid name and in the difficulty of finding a precise definition of its activities, and partly for these reasons it does not receive everywhere the serious attention which it deserves. Yet the study of human society is not to be despised or neglected, and the sociologists deserve credit and gratitude for the persistence with which they have fought for their cause. Their subject cuts across history, anthropology, economics, religion, geography, and psychology, but that merely means that it is a new and independent approach to matters which have not hitherto been fitted into any single sector of organized learning. Just because they are studied from fresh angles in this way, these matters assume a new significance and illuminate the fields of learning which they invade. Something of the same kind may be said about general linguistics. The origins of language are wrapped in an impenetrable past, but at least it is possible to examine the structure of language by other methods than constructing genealogical trees within certain familiar and recognized families. Our knowledge of unfamiliar languages has been enormously extended by the work of scholars in Far Eastern Asia, in central Africa, among the inland peoples of Central and South America, and the aborigines of Australia. The enormous differences between them have destroyed any hope of discovering a *lingua Adamica* such as our forebears sought, but our new information shows how badly some accepted concepts fit the actual facts and how much there is to learn about the ways in which man expresses his thoughts in speech. Linguistic study touches psychology and even physiology on one side, and philosophy on the other, and it is lucky at least in having the support of recent movements in philosophy, not always appreciated by adepts of an older school, which have emphasized the need to define what grammar is and to analyse how in actual practice it works.

The subjects which I have mentioned may all be regarded as belonging to 'Literary Science' and therefore falling within the range of activities prescribed to the British Academy. But there are other subjects which by their very nature break away from this, and, because they are to some degree concerned with Natural Science, trespass on the ancient and esteemed rights of the Royal Society. An example of these is the application of physical and chemical techniques to archaeological finds in the hope of dating them. This technique has grown steadily and sturdily in recent years, and is said to be relatively reliable for some 20,000 years or so in the past. It is still perfecting its methods and may not yet be so exact as we should like, but we can with confidence look forward to the time when dates will be fixed for objects which at present lack them or have been given them on grounds which excite suspicion. The main part of such work belongs to physicists and chemists. Archaeologists can set the problems and enjoy the results, but, in their concentration on their own speciality, they can hardly do the rest also. This is a case in which Literary and Natural Science work happily together, and each needs the other if solid results are to be found. Something of the same kind may be said of the History of Science, though the division of labour is less obvious and the need for scientific assistance less direct. To be a master of this subject a scholar must know a good deal about both history and science, about history because he must relate scientific discoveries to the societies which made them and which have been affected by them, and about science, because otherwise he will not understand fully the nature of such discoveries or why they produce such results as they do. This may not be beyond the scope of a single scholar within a single field of work, but, taken as a whole, the subject calls for a wide measure of co-operation between historians and scientists. In these cases the distinction which our founders made has to be discarded, and we can only regard this as a just concession to the lively spirit of human curiosity which in the end always refuses to be confined within artificial limits.

It is clear that by breaking through established barriers or cutting across accepted boundaries, inquiry can advance into new and highly promising territories. But of course this is not to say that these new fields should become our only or even our main fields of study. The old disciplines are so well established and have developed so many techniques of their own that they are indispensable for the training of future scholars, who would be wise to master their elements before moving on to something

new and different. It is also clear from the amount of work done in familiar fields that their possibilities are far from being exhausted. Indeed one of the advantages which we may claim for the breaking of old barriers is that it creates new lines of approach to established studies and provokes new questions about them. There is, as I have said, a danger that too great an attachment to the existing structure of teaching and research may dry up the springs of curiosity and lead to an arid scholasticism. I will not deny that this provides its own satisfactions and has at least the elegance of a difficult game played to strict rules. But this delicate and ingenious pastime is not the same thing as the solid advancement of knowledge, nor are its repercussions nearly so wide in the civilized circles for which scholars provide an intellectual centre. From this centre knowledge radiates outward to many people who are prevented by the exigencies of their different callings from pursuing it for its own sake but are none the less deeply interested in knowing what is happening. In this process results may lose some of their strength and precision, but they are none the less potent forces in the intellectual life of the nation. We can hardly overestimate the importance of new discoveries in any field of research or of any attempt to extend inquiry beyond familiar limits. A new discovery or a new approach alters the whole intellectual scene and inspires workers in it with a revived confidence and an assurance that they are not working in a blind alley and that the past and the present have still secrets to reveal to those who know how to look for them.

The expansion into new fields calls for new facilities, notably in resources and training, and we must ask how the British Academy can help in providing them. We can at least claim that we are aware of the problem. In allowing some of our Fellows to be members of more than one Section, we recognize that the boundaries between Sections are not absolute. We try to arrange lectures on new discoveries, and in the past year we were the first learned body in this country to hear Mr. L. S. B. Leakey on his astonishing find of 'Nutcracker man' in Tanganyika. But we can do more than this, and there is one respect in which I hope that we shall. In the past year we have set up a British Institute of History and Archaeology in East Africa. It is receiving support from both the home and the colonial governments, and it is under the tutelage of the Academy. Through it many fields of inquiry will be opened to students both old and young, and its possibilities are beyond calculation. There are other parts of the

world where similar institutes would be equally valuable, and I have particularly in mind Iran and the Far East. These could not only become centres for advanced work on the civilization of ancient Asian countries but also provide training for students who have taken their degrees and are eager to move into new fields of activity. In such institutes they will learn the languages which are indispensable for new inquiries of the kind that I have mentioned, and they will enjoy the powerful stimulus of seeing from within civilizations in so many ways unlike our own. If we can increase the number of such Institutes, we shall do an immense service to learning over a very wide range of subjects. Enterprises of this kind call for much expense of time and trouble, especially at the start, and though the Academy has no large resources of personnel and overworks those which it has, I know that their efforts will not be grudged. We are indeed fortunate to be served so well, and I would like to close by paying a tribute of gratitude and admiration, on behalf of all of us, to our Secretary and the other members of our staff, all of whom have given so generously of their devotion in the last year and enabled the Academy to maintain and expand its work for learning.