VOLTAIRE
On the Royal Society of London & the Academies


Professor Robert A. Hatch Edited & Modified This Text

All great men have either been formed before the institution of academies, or at least without any assistance from them. Homer and Phidias, Sophocles and Apelles, Virgil and Vitruvius, Ariosto and Michelangelo, belonged to no academy; Tasso met with no other advantages besides a few ill-grounded criticisms from that of La Crusca; nor was Newton indebted to the Royal Society of London for his discoveries in optics, gravitation, the doctrine of integrals, and chronology. Of what use then are academies? To keep alive that flame which great geniuses have kindled.

The Royal Society of London was formed in 1660, six years before our Academy of Sciences. [97] This society bestows no premiums or rewards, as ours does; but then to make amends every member is perfectly at liberty; there are none of those disagreeable distinctions, invented by the Abbé Bignon, who divided the Academy of Sciences into literary members who had salaries, and mere honoraries who had no pretensions to learning. The Society of London, wholly independent of, and unengaged by any but themselves, was composed of persons who, as I have already observed, discovered the series of infinities, the laws of light and colors, those of gravity, the aberration of the fixed stars, the reflecting telescope, the fire-engine, the solar microscope, with many other inventions equally useful and astonishing. What more could those great men have done for the public utility, had they been either pensioners or honoraries?

The famous Dr. Swift, in the latter part of Queen Anne’s reign, formed the design of establishing an academy for the English language on the
model of the French Academy. This project was supported by the earl of Oxford, then at the head of the treasury, and still more by Lord Bolingbroke, who possessed the talent of speaking extempore in parliament with all that purity with which Swift wrote in his closet, and who would have been at once the patron and the ornament of this academy. The members who were to have composed it were persons whose writings will last as long as the English language; namely, Dr. Swift; Mr. Prior, whom we have seen at our court, in a public character, and who is held in the same reputation in England as [98] La Fontaine in France; Mr. Pope, the English Boileau; Mr. Congreve, who may be justly styled their Molière,¹ with several others whose names I cannot well remember; all of whom could not have failed to have rendered this body illustrious in its very infancy. But the queen unfortunately happening to die suddenly, the Whigs took it into their heads to bring the protectors of these, if possible, to the block or gallows; a mortal blow, as you may well imagine, to the belles-lettres. The members who were to have composed this academy would have had a prodigious advantage over the founders of ours. Swift, Prior, Congreve, Dryden, Pope, Addison, etc., had fixed the English language by their writings; whereas Chapelain, Colletet, Cassaigne, Faret, Cotin, our first academicians, were the scandal of our nation, and their names so ridiculous, that at this day, should any author have the misfortune to be called Chapelain or Cotin, he would be under the necessity of changing his name.

Besides, the English academy would have adopted a very different plan of operation from that of ours. One day one of the wits of that country asked me to show him some of the memoirs of the French Academy. I told him they had not written any memoirs, but they had printed about four-score volumes of compliments. He glanced over one or two of them. He could by no means comprehend a single syllable of what they meant, though he very [99] well understood all our good authors. “All I can discover,” said he, “by this multitude of fine speeches, is, that after the new candidate has told them that his predecessor was a very great man, that Cardinal Richelieu was an exceedingly great man, and Chancellor Séguier a very eminent man; the director answered him in the same manner that echoed back the same expressions; adding that the candidate might possibly be a great man; and as for himself, the
director, he did not mean by all this to forfeit his title to be one among
the rest.” It is easy to discover by what kind of fatality almost all those
academical discourses have done this body so little honor. *Vitium est
temporis potius quam hominis.* The custom has been established
insensibly, that every academician should repeat those eulogiums at his
reception; this was no more than to make it a kind of law to tire the
patience of the public. Should we afterwards inquire, how it came to
pass, that the greatest geniuses who have entered into this society have
sometimes made the worst harangues, the reason is very evident; it is,
that they wanted to shine by treating a threadbare subject in a manner
different from all who had gone before them. The necessity of saying
something, when one has not a syllable to say; the plague of mixing
something new in a subject already exhausted; and withal, that passion
of showing one’s talents, are enough to make the greatest wit appear
truly ridiculous. Not being able to find anything but what has been said
before, they rack their brains to give the old thoughts new clothing, by
forced [100] turns of expression, and have been compelled to speak
without thinking; like people who act as if they were eating, while they
are ready to perish with hunger. Instead of the law whereby the French
Academy have bound themselves to print all their discourses, which
are, properly speaking, the whole of their works, methinks they had
done better, had they made it a law to print none of them at all.

The academy of *belles-lettres* have proposed a wiser and more
advantageous end, which is that of presenting the public with a
collection of memoirs, filled with researches and ingenious criticisms.
Those memoirs are already in esteem among foreigners; only one
would wish they had dipped somewhat deeper in certain subjects, and
that they had entirely passed by some others without notice. We could
have very well dispensed, for instance, with such disquisitions as the
origin of the preference due to the right hand over the left, with some
other researches, which, though with titles not quite so ridiculous, are
not less frivolous. The Academy of Sciences, in her more difficult, but
more evidently useful, inquiries, is wholly employed in the study of
nature, and the perfecting of the arts. It is to be believed that studies,
which are at once so profound and so closely pursued, calculations so
exact, discoveries so nice and ingenious, and views so extensive, will
one day produce something that may be greatly to the advantage of mankind.

The most useful discoveries have been made in the most barbarous ages; and it seems to be the lot of the most enlightened periods, and of the most [101] learned bodies, to reason about the inventions of the ignorant. We may know, after the long disputes of Mr. Huygens and Mr. Renaud, the determination of the most advantageous angle of the rudder of a ship with her keel; but Christopher Columbus had discovered America without so much as dreaming of any such angle. I am far from inferring from this that we ought to confine ourselves wholly to the uncertainty of blind practice; but it would be a happiness if natural philosophers and geometricians would, as much as possible, join the practical part to the theory. Is it absolutely necessary, that what does the most honor to the human mind should often be the least useful. A man who is possessed of the four common rules of arithmetic, with a natural stock of good sense, becomes an eminent merchant, a James Cœur, a Delmet, or a Bernard; while a poor algebraist passes his days in discovering wonderful relations and astonishing properties in numbers, but of no manner of use, and which would never have let him into the common course of exchange. All the arts are pretty much the same. There is a certain point, beyond which all is matter of mere curiosity. These ingenious but useful truths are like the stars, which are placed at such an infinite distance from us that we reap not the least advantage from their beams.

As for the French Academy, what advantage might they not afford to learning, to the language, and to the nation, if, instead of pestering the world every year with a magazine of fulsome compliments, they had published the good authors of the age of [102] Louis XIV., purged from all those faults in language which have crept into them? Corneille and Molière are quite full of them. Fontaine swarms with such mistakes. Those at least might be pointed out that appear incapable of being mended. Europe, which reads our authors, might in them learn our language safe from all danger of a vicious idiom. Its purity would then be fixed forever. The best French authors, carefully published at the king’s expense, would be one of the most glorious monuments of the nation. I have heard that Boileau formerly made a proposal of this kind;
and that it has been since renewed by one whose wit and good sense, as well as sound criticism, are well known; but with the common fate of many other useful projects, that of being approved and neglected.

It is very extraordinary that Corneille, who composed the first of his good tragedies at a time when the language was only beginning to be formed, should have written them with tolerable purity and great sublimity, and all the rest in a loose, incorrect, and even low style, though Racine had then bestowed on the French language so much purity, so much sublimity and grace; and while Boileau fixed it by the most exact corrections, precision, strength, fullness, energy, and harmony. Let any one but compare the “Bérénice” of Racine with that of Corneille, and he would imagine this latter to have been written in the age of Tristan. It would make one believe that Corneille neglected his style in proportion as he was under a greater necessity to support it, and that his sole emulation was to write, [103] when it should have been to write well. His last twelve or thirteen tragedies are not only wretched, but in a very mean style. What is still more surprising is, that, even in our own days, we have had plays, with other performances both in prose and verse, composed by academicians, who have neglected their language to such a degree that one can hardly read ten verses in them without meeting with some barbarism. We may overlook a few faults in a good author; but where they grow numerous, it is impossible for such a work to support the writer’s reputation. A company of persons of good taste one day counted more than six hundred intolerable solecisms in a tragedy which had met with distinguished applause both in Paris and at court. Two or three instances of such unmerited success would be sufficient to corrupt the language past all possibility of recovery, and to plunge it into its ancient barbarism, from whence it has been drawn by the assiduous labors of so many great men.

VOLTAIRE: ON THE ROYAL SOCIETY of LONDON & ACADEMIES
http://oll.libertyfund.org/indexold.html