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Founder's Focus - Academia: Friend or Foe?

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FOUNDER'S FOCUS

ACADEMIA: FRIEND OR FOE ?

GLEN B. GOODKNIGHT

What has academia to do with a person reading and enjoying a favorite book? To quote from *The Hobbit*: "lots and none at all." The answer can be either, or something in between, for each individual. But what I wish to discuss is what the answer should be for all of us together, as the Society.

To start with, we need to define academia. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *academy* as first "a name of a garden near Athens where Plato taught," hence "a place where the arts and sciences are taught; an institution of higher learning" and thus on to the modern understanding as "a Society or institution for the cultivation and promotion of literature, of arts and sciences, or of some particular art or science."

Like nearly all institutional establishments such as business, government, and health care, the educational or academic establishment is suspect today. There tends to be a popular feeling that it is entrenched and concerned far more with its own survival and aggrandizement than serving the general good. In addition, since we tend to be maverick individualists who "want what we want, when we want it", many of us have experienced presently or in the past, the feeling of being forced to abide by seemingly arbitrary regulations in our formal education, set down by a seemingly aloof hierarchy. This feeling apparently extends from high school students on through university graduate students even to those who have a profession in less than the very highest levels of academia.

Why should this be of any concern to members of The Mythopoeic Society? After all, the Society offers no degrees, requires no tests, nor grades people on their level of literary knowledge. We are *not* in intent or structure anything like academia. Membership, open to all interested, reflects a broad spectrum of educational levels, ages, and attitudes. The relevant question is this: in our enthusiasm for the interests of the Society, are we as concerned with the further sharing of the things we know and wish to know, as we are with our own present enjoyment of them? If we are, then academia is the best single way (I do *not* suggest the only way) to disseminate and engender them further.

Why? Because academia has the best structure and tools for this purpose. It provides a generalized way to approach subject matter that transcends individual attitudes and tastes, thus better to

transmit information for the benefit of the greatest number of people, both now and for the future.

This may seem abhorrent to some members whose experience with the Society's interests has been only through isolated individual contact or through the ephemeral adventure of "fan" groups. Such groups, tending to dislike what is considered the dampening influence of dispassionate method and approach, usually choose enthusiasm as the prime mover. But enthusiasm, in distinction to values, is an emotion, and like other emotions tends to dissipate with the passage of time. Do not misunderstand; emotions are extremely vital to our lives, and I in no way advocate dismissing their importance. But as for me, the Society's interests have not only caught my emotions, but have permeated even more deeply to quieter regions of my being where they abide as well. In the over twelve years of experience with the Society I have seen wave after wave of enthusiasm wash over various sectors of the Society, only to subside after a relatively short period of time. Our corporate interests certainly deserve and evoke enthusiasm, but they also deserve a better foundation for constancy. Enthusiasm is like adrenalin, necessary and desired at certain times, but not evocable at all times.

Some, I fear, do not make the distinction between the tools that academia has to offer and the overly formal and impersonal aspects of it that most of us have experienced negatively. Tools are neutral. It is those who wield the tools that determine their effect for good or ill. In my opinion, the Society has not been able completely to realize its full potential in the past, in part because of a division of opinion within its members on this and other related issues. Some seem to have taken the attitude that they have achieved a high level of expertise, and if academia wants to know of it, then academia must seek them out! This seems to me to be a less than mature attitude, much like a researcher who has found a possible cure of cancer but smugly waits for the medical world to come calling at his doorstep for the information!

I propose we keep our spirits free, our gifts of individual personality and insight intact, and be open to all the tools and resources available to us, the better to share those things we love that have brought us joy.

37 The plays of Charles Williams show much the same movement towards the use of symbolical figures to embody meaning as does his poetry in its development from *Heroes and Kings* (1930) to *Region*. Since the plays parallel roughly the poetic development and since there is none solely concerned with the City, the plays will be omitted from this discussion although they, in some ways, anticipate Williams' later poetic efforts. See Anne Ridler, *Introd. to The Seed of Adam* for an account of the development of Williams' drama.

38 Williams' habit of regarding poetic images and even structural design as "images" or embodiments of a higher reality has been discussed by Dorothy Sayers in *Further Papers on Dante* (New York, 1957), pp. 183-204. Miss Sayers points out that Williams, like Dante, is a poet of the Image: that both belong to a philosophical and mystical tradition of the Affirmation of Images. Poets working in this tradition express their meaning in images and produce poetry characterized by "the gathering of all images into the basic image" (p. 190). "There is not--