

What Is "Academic Status"?

Much of the discussion of academic status within the library profession has proceeded from an emotional rather than a rational base. The author proposes that clarity may be gained by analyzing the "formal environment" of academic status. He then attempts to do so and concludes that a librarian "is in a sense the academic environment himself, and is accordingly pre-eminently academic."

THE QUESTION of *academic status* for librarians in academic institutions is widely discussed, both in the professional¹ literature and in conversation among affected persons. But the rationale that could truly justify such status has not been touched upon by such discussion—at least in part because the attempt has been to try to analyze "academic-status-for-librarians" before "academic-status-as-such" has been made sufficiently transparent. Much of what has been said and written ignores the basic phenomena of the situation as a situation; accordingly, caught in a situation but unable to see it as such, the protagonist (here, the embattled librarian) cannot hope to render it transparent to himself. In a word, his reaction to the problem is an *emotional* one.²

To see the situation phenomenologically then is to step outside it, to reduce it to its essential characteristics rather

¹ The problem "what is professional status?" is one that likewise deserves attention; but not just here.

² Such a state of mind is evinced in arguments like "In the university where I worked last, there was no question but that librarians . . ."; or, on the other side, "How can librarians talk of academic status when they do not do the same work as do faculty members?" Such propositions simply serve to render the situation entirely opaque to (phenomeno-) logical examination, by setting it up as self-justifying.

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than to try to "fight the problem." And, as a problem thus reduced to a situation, several features are easily discernable:

1. If we do indeed, as librarians, have professional status, gaining academic status must mean assuming a new one;

2. If academic status, just as much as professional status, is a problem to librarians, it must likewise be one for other professionals, including the professional teachers;

3. *Status* implies *role*; *rank*, faculty or otherwise, is not the same—though it is not immediately clear what relevance it does have to status.

WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC QUESTION?

If, instead of attempting at the outset to give an answer to the question "What is academic status?", an attempt is made to analyze its formal environment, a sort of "neighborhood" of ideas can be built up into which we can place our principal problem. A circuitous rather than a frontal assault, as it were.

What then is meant by saying "that was only meant as an academic question" or "after all, that question is no more than academic"? Clearly, the proposition that unites *academic* and *question* does so at the expense of the existential value of the content implied as belonging to the question. Its essential content may be of the highest value, but its place in the real world is taken as being

less rightful and solid than that of a "practical question." *Academic* can be seen to be at least in part synonymous with *leading to a foregone conclusion, visionary, impractical*, and the like. It is that which is set aside from actuality (but not from reality, which includes the possible as well as the actual) by virtue of its speculateness.

Again: an academic question is personal where a practical one is impersonal, impersonal where a practical one is personal. To be academic then does NOT mean to be abstract (as against the "concreteness" of the practical question), but rather it means a reversal of whatever attitude would characterize the same question asked as a practical one.

Thus the locating of the academic person in an ivory tower is at least a natural reaction to his tendency to view the problems and mysteries of the world in a manner antithetical to that characteristic of the man in the street.

HISTORY OF "THE ACADEMY"

Historically, it is only accidental that Plato's *academy* (a wooded park in which he conversed with his followers), rather than Aristotle's *lyceum* (the precinct of Apollo Lyceus in which he and his followers walked about—peripatetically), or the *stoa* (porch) where the Stoics sat in discussion, should have been chosen as the typical environment of "the academic." Note though that it was not always thus: up until the end of classical antiquity (as embodied in the Roman Empire) "the Academy" implied the Platonists and the neo-Platonists as united into a "school." The Peripatetics, followers of Aristotle, were not so fortunate in perpetuation of their doctrines; indeed, even those philosophers who can be called Peripatetic were strongly influenced by Platonic and neo-Platonic doctrines—so much so that the anonymous and evidently neo-Platonic *Liber de Causis* was long regarded as written

by Aristotle himself. During this whole period, "Academy," "Lyceum," and "Stoa" were each looked upon as antagonistic to the others, none being assumed to be able to absorb the others entirely.

There was not just one renaissance during the period (the Middle Ages) from the end of classical antiquity to the emergence of modern times. One of these was the rediscovery, through Arabic channels, and through such Christian writers as Boethius, of Aristotle.³ This rediscovery was the origin of the Scholasticism that dominated the central part of this whole "Middle" period. And it was this allegedly narrow and sterile Aristotelian culture that was the specific target of the next renaissance, that which is called *the Renaissance*, basing itself on the supposedly antithetical doctrines of Plato.⁴ And, in honor of him whom they most highly honored (and perhaps in recognition of the originativeness and persistence of his school), the groups which were set up for discussion of the problem of the revitalization on intellectual life through the revival of classical antiquity were called *academies*. In these earliest examples of what we can recognize as academic status, the Italian Renaissance princes are seen supporting *litterati* from Greece in assisting the incipient Western scholars to absorb the heritage of classical antiquity. A double goal can be seen: *discussion*, and, for its sake: *instruction*, all at the expense of the prince-patron.

The *book* was of course central to all this, even though it was regarded, prior to the rise of printing, as an intellectual entity rather than a physical one.⁵ Aside

³ Cf. for instance F. van Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the West* (Louvain, Nauwelaerts, 1955).

⁴ Still, notice the constant concern of the greatest of Renaissance scholars, like Ficino, the guiding spirit of the Platonic Academy at Florence, to reconcile Plato with Aristotle—as had Arabic philosophers like Alfarabi.

⁵ Note the usual employment of "book," in the pre-Gutenberg era, as equivalent to what we now normally call a "chapter"; cf. in general M. MacLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (University of Toronto Press, 1962).

from the hope for reinvigoration and elevation of vernaculars (present throughout and even from the very beginnings of the Renaissance: Petrarch, Boccaccio, *etc.*) a considerable part of the effort of the Renaissance was devoted to the making available of the book-heritage of classical antiquity through such men as Erasmus and Aldus; nor were bibliographers such as Gesner and Naudé outside the central purpose and approval of other Renaissance scholars and patrons.

Renascence is a constant need, and when *the* Renaissance had begun to run down, just as had that renascence which had given rise to Scholasticism, a new renascence once again crystalized around a new kind of academy, founded, rather than upon theology and philosophy (as in the universities of the Scholastic period), or upon classical literature and thought (as in the Italian Platonic academies), upon the modern ideal of scientific experimentation and verification. Simultaneously, the older universities were declining further and further from the glowing pre-eminence of the time of Peter Abelard, Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus.⁶ These new academies arose often without the degree of official basis seen in the Scholastic universities or the Italian academies; but there was a more important difference: they were not institutions but societies. To be academic at that time would not have implied being a professional teacher—which in any case would not have been a high recommendation—but rather being a poser of academic questions, an experimenter willing to try anything, a speculator free of rigid dogmatism.⁷ (Academic free-

dom, arising out of this historical background, could provide another enviroing idea for the placement of *the academic.*)

The situational phenomenon to emphasize here is that academics may well have been professionals (at least as we have since developed that idea), but assuredly were NOT professional teachers. If anything, their predominant professionalism was that of producers of ideas—writers, broadly taken, or bookmen (as against the mediaeval schoolmen). The connection to the classroom was not so strong as the connection to the world of books. But, since books are communication-by-inscription and teaching is communication-by-event, the academies can be seen as attempts to reunite these types of communication: the producers of books are being helped and urged to teach each other by event rather than by inscription. To be academic then did not mean merely to write well, or to teach well, but to have such ideas as could stimulate others (on the level of the communicator, not below it, as students necessarily are). The rise of the learned journal as a means to such communication, originally viewed as a sort of open-letter, semi-event, semi-inscription distribution of ideas for the scholarly community itself, can be drawn into the same environment of ideas.

Looking back over this development, new formalities can be added to the gradually crystalizing idea of *academic*: while "the academic" implies freedom from practicality, it is the basis for the generosity of princes and for mutual co-operation between scholars; this generosity and cooperation comes about as a result of accomplishments of the recipients; these accomplishments are of a creative order, either artistic or intellectual; and these creations are the overt

⁶ "In the course of the [18th] century, old foundations like Paris and Oxford sank to depths unknown in their long history, and even the younger universities were in the majority of cases so feeble and inert that men of outstanding ability, like Leibnitz, were reluctant to associate themselves with them."—W. Boyd, *The History of Western Education* (London; Black, 1959), p. 281.

⁷ Not necessarily religious; indeed, through the authority of the clerics so often in control of the

declining universities, the attitude of dogmatism (accepted by all at the time, in religion) was allowed to spill over into many other fields: astronomy and the case of Galileo is the most familiar example.

signs of the internal operations of the member-recipient-creators.

"ACADEMIC STATUS" PROVISIONALLY DEFINED

A provisional definition of the *academic person* then, in terms of his situation, would read somewhat like this: He is academic whose personal, unofficial, subjective activities are judged to be of such public, objective value that official sanction is given him, in two forms—support and freedom. That upon which this sanction is based is his overt works (events or inscriptions), at the academic rather than the merely professional level.

TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS

Teaching is raising students from a lower status to a higher, whether this effect is credited to the student himself as possessor of innate ideas (*anamnesis*), to the teacher as imposer of new ideas (*tabula rasa*), or to the Holy Spirit as indwelling generator (*ideae seminales*). It is not of itself academic by my definition, yet the example of Abelard (who, when he was cast out of the University of Paris, drew a whole school along with him, as he had even before he came to teach at Notre Dame) clearly demonstrates that intellectual/artistic creativity as personal or interpersonal (academic) communing almost inevitably draws forth interlevel communication (teaching). To teach and yet to conform fully to the above description of *academic* could then be described as "overt communing." It is an activity radically different from teaching seen as the processing of students.

Librarians, assuming that their professional status is justified, do not automatically gain status as academics, any more than do members of the teaching profession. Academic status does not flow from possession of degrees (though professional status may, and this last may be a precondition—an overt sign—

to the official sanction of academic status), nor from performance of quasi-teaching functions.⁸

The overt value of the librarian's function in the academic environment flows from the value of the body of inscriptions which he makes available (by selection, cataloging and classification, circulation, etc.), and upon this value depends the value of the public (teaching) as well as the personal (academic) activities of the academy-university. Such a body of inscriptions is in fact the library, and is thus the environment of the academic activity itself—as any academic person knows when in his own library. But, though ideally the collection itself is the library, in practice the librarian is the library, insofar as he selects, catalogs, and services the entities that constitute it. The librarian, thus, is in a sense the academic environment himself, and is accordingly pre-eminent-ly academic.

FACULTY RANK

One final point is to be made, about the variant statement of academic status in the phrase *faculty rank*.⁹ "Faculty" is basically a constitutive virtue of an organism. An animal has faculties, without which it would not be an animal. No faculty is the whole animal. Likewise, no faculty is the whole university; the university is constituted (we could here substitute "instituted") of several faculties. That is indeed what gives it its *universalitas*. Faculty rank is accordingly equivalent to rank within a faculty, and, by analogy, between faculties.

(Continued on page 232)

⁸ As a corollary of the arguments that librarians assist in the function of teaching and are thus on a level with the teaching faculty; this argument is valid but not necessarily of probative weight, since it ignores the situation for the sake of an emotional response to an emotional problem.

⁹ There could of course be two other combinations of these two terms: academic rank, faculty status. They are not considered as alternative formulations because what is sought is a clear dichotomy, the implications of which will make it clear that the latter two combinations are inappropriate or even self-contradictory.

formation retrieval will come to the junior college library as it will eventually come to all kinds of libraries. It is already being used experimentally in all kinds of libraries. In many cases, the information system will use the college computer. The fact that automation seems expensive should not retard its use. If library services are improved by automation, then the expense is worthwhile. Librarians have not always sought improved services as forcefully as they should. Of course, the sophistication to use such devices successfully must be developed, but the trend among junior college librarians to adopt audio-visual aids suggests a readiness to consider other devices also.

It seems clear that strong medicine is needed for these libraries. Perhaps this means strong federal support. Perhaps it means strong ACRL lobbying with college presidents. Perhaps it means a stronger breed of junior college librarians. At any rate, the future should be exciting. ■■

ACADEMIC STATUS . . .

(Continued from page 210)

But "faculty," as understood by the great German universities that arose concomitant to and following the rise of the last, Leibnizian, type of academy, was *Fach*, "a discipline." To be a *Fachmann* was not regarded as anything other than to be a professor of a subject, a specialist. To what *Fach* then would the librarian belong except that of library science? But the librarian need not teach to be academic; indeed, to teach puts the librarian in a less secure academic position than to select or catalog books, etc. The library science faculty is no more proof against the charge of mere processing of students than any other teacher—less, in fact, due to the vocationalism of many such faculties.

Thus, within the faculty (*Fach*) are found ranks, the ordinary means of self-

preservation of the alienated. The *Fach* is alienated within the *universitas* except by academic communing, which places the *Fachmann* on a new level, outside his narrow specialistic professionalism: the status of academician.

EPILOGUE

Academic status then, as viewed in the transparency of the situation, is a qualification added to that (for teachers) of faculty rank or to that (for librarians) of professional standing. It is not automatically predicated on either of these types of professional persons, but rather is a feature of the institution to which they belong. Like "standing," *status* implies a level, but not the discrete "I'm higher in rank than you," characteristic of faculty rank, but rather implies one level, the single plane of overt communing as determined by the nature and orientation of the institution. Such overt communing can take place only within the book environment which the librarian in a sense *is*. Without teaching, without even ever coming into personal contact with his fellow academicians, in an overt communing that can remain quite impersonal, the librarian—as selector, cataloger, and servicer of the library—is the typical academic. ■■

BOOK SELECTION . . .

(Continued from page 224)

of graduate facilities and resources. They are less reliable, however, when it comes to agreeing on the basic works in their field. You can get as many statements of what is essential and considered "standard" in each discipline as individuals you might wish to consult. Under these circumstances, it becomes the librarian's responsibility to acquaint the faculty with sound principles of book selection and a clear understanding of his acquisition problems and budgetary limitations. Only then is real cooperation possible. ■■