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## THEN AND NOW

BY LOUISE POUND, *President of the Association*

I HOPE this microphone works. If you have to listen to me I hope you can hear me. Once before at a gathering of a learned society, seeing an upright gadget before me, I talked with extreme care directly into it for half an hour, moving neither to the right nor to the left, only to find as I went down from the platform that it was a *lamp*.

For half a century I have belonged to the MLA. My name first appears in the Proceedings for 1906, printed in 1907. Apparently I joined in a historic year. Percy Waldron Long, who became Secretary of our Association in 1935 and its President in 1948, joined in that same year, 1906, and our retiring Secretary, William Riley Parker, to whom the MLA owes its recent and long needed Foreign Language Program, was born in that year. Recently when looking over old volumes of *PMLA* I was surprised to note—I had utterly forgotten this—that in 1898 I was on the program of the Central Division, the earliest Division to splinter off for geographical convenience from the MLA proper. It was founded at a Chicago meeting in 1895 and was given up at Ann Arbor in 1923. Thereafter the general meetings were to alternate between the East and the “West,” the latter usually meaning Chicago. By our day multiple divisions of our now gargantuan parent organization have arisen in the South and West, with the Rocky Mountain Division nearest the old Central.<sup>1</sup> In 1898 Chancellor G. E. MacLean of the University of

<sup>1</sup> The history of the MLA outlining its beginnings and growth has been admirably taken care of by its secretaries and presidents. Carleton Brown made “A Survey of the First Half-Century,” *PMLA*, XLVIII (Supplement, 1933), 1409–22; P. W. Long printed “The Association in Review,” LXIV (March 1949, Supplement), 1–12; and W. R. Parker in “The MLA, 1883–1953,” LXVIII (Sept. 1953, Supplement), 3–39, gave a full account of the foundation of the Association, the personnel of its first membership, and its development

Nebraska, who studied at Berlin and Leipsic, Professors L. Fossler of the Department of German and A. H. Edgren, head of Romance Languages (founder of our graduate School, later Chancellor of the University of Göteborg, Sweden, later still member of the Nobel Prize Commission), brought the fourth session of the Central Division to Lincoln. I had been newly promoted from theme reader to a minor form of instructorship. When a paper from the Department of English Literature was wished for the program, my head, Dr. L. A. Sherman, asked me to prepare one. I was not a member of the MLA then, probably knew nothing about joining. I was in good company on the program. C. Alphonso Smith, then of the University of Louisiana, was the President of the Central Division. Sixteen papers were read. Among those taking part were three professors from the University of Chicago, F. I. Carpenter, A. H. Tolman, P. S. Allen. Others appearing were Raymond Weeks of Missouri and W. H. Carruth of Kansas. The subject I selected to discuss was (of all things) "The Relation of the Finnsburg Fragment to the Finn episode in *Beowulf*," a moot question then. Professor Blackburn of Chicago commented that he thought the paper should be published. Inexperienced as I was, unacquainted with organs of publication and none too sure of my home-grown Anglo-Saxon, I did nothing about this. Perhaps I should have tried to print my venture, for its conclusions were those ultimately prevailing.

Joining as I did in the early twentieth century if not in the late nineteenth, I come tonight trailing clouds of MLA memories, manners, and mores. Am I becoming a professional patriarch? I reported in this role to the Dialect Society a few years ago and I was given a gold pin recently for membership for fifty years in a local society. I have kept up my MLA membership all these decades except for paying dues. In the first World War period when life memberships were offered for \$25 I took out one. The Treasurer of the MLA informs me that I have saved \$151 thereby through the years.

I promise to try not to exceed my allotted time. I do not want my hearers to say of me what Gertrude Stein once said in a private letter. She remarked of a woman speaker (I have quoted this saying often and widely since I came upon it), "She's the kind you like the better the more you hear her less."

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and expansion into our own period. The original records of the Association were not preserved and he supplied missing information after much research, even identifying the original members and following their careers. Most important perhaps of the timely innovations introduced by Secretary Parker was his foundation and directorship of the FL (Foreign Language) Program with its clearing house and communication activities and its incitement to constructive personal activities on the part of our members.

## II

My first intention was to recount tonight, as a few members suggested to me, some of my memories of late nineteenth-century trends in academic curricula and scholarship, when philology was in the ascendant, classical, then Germanic. Ambitious students were supposed to study linguistics in Germany under such distinguished scholars as Brugmann or Braune. For Anglo-Saxon they sought Sievers and Wülcker at Leipsic or Zupitza at Berlin. Philology had advanced rapidly in the great days following Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819-37). Vocabulary, etymology, phonology, morphology, syntax were investigated, as they still are in lesser degree. Linguistic study has been carried far by our time. Primitive languages, African, Australian, South American and North American Indian languages and Esquimau, have been brought into our linguistic horizon. With the help of archaeologists Sumerian has been discovered and attempts have been made to restore it. Recently I was asked whether the culmination has not been reached in our day with those "glamorous topics semantics and phonemes." My two predecessors, professorial appointees in our English department, had each spent two years in Germany. When they went to other institutions my head promised me philology in the department if I would study for a year in Germany, which I did. I had thought of going to Leipsic as they had done. But when I wrote asking whether I could be a candidate for a doctorate there, the answer came by return mail, "Nein, *nein*, NEIN!!!" with exclamation points. This proved very fortunate for me. I did not wish to try Berlin, feeling I could gain little attention there but would be lost in numbers at so large an institution. Undaunted by the firm stand of Leipsic I tried Dr. Johannes Hoops of Heidelberg, editor of *Englische Studien*. He was not dismayed at the thought of a feminine candidate but had had able and successful women students, and he proved to be one of the friendliest and most helpful of men. I had a beautiful year. I did not have, as did Martha Carey Thomas at the University of Zürich, to listen to the professors from behind a curtain. But had I wished to hear the lectures on Goethe by a celebrated Professor at Heidelberg or to those by him on art, I would have been cautioned to watch my mode of dress carefully. "Too elaborate feminine dress was barred," I was told, "lest it distract the attention of the Herren."

A 500th anniversary of the foundation of the University of Heidelberg was celebrated in 1935. Dr. Hoops, who was president of the International Federation of Universities in that year, asked me to attend as an American delegate, my expenses to be paid by a German Foundation in this country. But 1936 came in the Hitler period and my department and University officials thought it wiser for me not to accept.

## III

I look back with nostalgia on my early days in the MLA. It was then tripartite with the divisions English, Romance, German. One could attend all three and hear all the papers offered in them if one wished. That was "then." Now we migrate from room to room, sometimes from building to building, hoping to hear, if we can, the papers in the special research or discussion groups that interest us. This only to find that all those we wish to hear come simultaneously. These changes in the structure of the society did not come, of course, from changes in policy but resulted from increasing enrolment, and beyond question they have advanced professional training and scholarship among us. The MLA has risen in membership, scope, and dignity to a degree that the founding fathers could not have foreseen.

Characteristic too of those earlier days were the large banquets, not so large however but that all could attend. When too many speeches had been planned, programs might last till midnight or beyond. On one occasion, a major speech by the city Mayor was not reached till 11:30 or slightly after. I had been canny in selecting my seating and could escape down the backstairs into the kitchen when others could not. I did not hear the Mayor. And there were the famous "Smoke Talks," supposed to be especially witty and rewarding occasions. Bliss Perry gave the first one in 1901. These I could not attend. There were also the "Old Guard" dinners for those who had been members for twenty-five years. These I could attend, and did when I could qualify. Secretary Long once stated that Marjorie Nicolson, who read the presidential addresses for the *PMLA Index* of 1935, said that reading them, all of them, aged her prematurely into eligibility for the Old Guard dinners.

To see and hear notable scholars and to follow the papers on diverse topics, whether convinced by them or resistant to their positions, was of intense interest to me. I think no one branded the MLA conventions of those days as serving chiefly as "appointment agencies" and fewer members lined up in the smoke-filled corridors while the reading of papers went on.

The decades following the Civil War were, as often pointed out, a period of educational awakening, questioning, and experiment. This was the day of the great college presidents such as Gilman of Johns Hopkins, Eliot of Harvard, White of Cornell. These succeeded the traditional clericals. It was too early for today's predilection for politicians, business men, and military men, selected often to quest for largesse. The times were marked by the increase of coeducational institutions, by the foundation of women's colleges, and—of especial interest to us—by major modification of courses of study. These had been framed primarily for

the training of clericals and missionaries, with Greek, Latin, sometimes Hebrew, the backbone. Mathematics and mental and moral philosophy were other subjects. It was thought that the curriculum should now be brought closer to the life of the people. Advocates of modern languages wanted for them a place in the sun alongside the classical languages. When the living languages entered the curriculum they were received, as often remarked, with much the same enthusiasm as that for Greek and Latin in the Renaissance period. Learned societies soon sprang up, such as our MLA, 1883, the Folklore Society, 1888, and the Dialect Society, 1889. All soon launched publications.

By the end of the century modern languages had about the best place in the curriculum. In addition to the study of French, German, Italian, the study of English, hitherto pretty much limited to Rhetoric and Logic, gained in importance. In my undergraduate days there was new academic attention to Anglo-Saxon, with such scholars as Francis A. March, Albert S. Cook, James W. Bright in the foreground. The traditional Rhetoric, now called by the less pretentious name of Composition, was a leading study in English departments. Oratory, now called Speech, loomed large. Dignity and correctness were striven for. As a theme reader I was supposed to ban contractions such as "won't," "don't," as rarely suitable. Coinages and excursions into colloquialisms, dialect, and slang, now ventured so liberally, were not striven for. "No such word in the dictionary" was a stock comment. It was too early for instructors to look askance at "contact" as a verb or "viewpoint" for point of view. Bits of sentences, the verb omitted, were dubiously allowed. They did not "parse." "Communication arts" had not yet entered the picture.

#### IV

All this is of the past. Enough of old but happy far off things exhumed from long ago. Time passes and we must turn to the present. It is a tradition that the givers of presidential speeches "cultivate their own gardens." I shall try to do this in a limited way, although my audience may think mine a weed patch rather than a garden.

"Now" is a large field and I narrow attention to hasty glances at a restricted area. As we know, earlier ideas concerning expression both written and oral are much changed by our time. Today we are in an unmistakable hurry and we have less respect for the established. We are less inhibited all along the line. We drift into the casual and informal. Indeed stronger terms than casual and informal are often in place, terms such as smart or flip. To illustrate, not so long ago, as a member and a Professor of English I was asked to announce an anniversary of a certain group. I composed my notice in standard form that would have the ap-

proval, I thought, of Emily Post or Amy Vanderbilt. When proof came, my wording had been replaced as quite unsuitable. My first sentence now read something like this: "Hi, gents and gals. Don't forget next week's classy get-together. There'll be hot times and swell doin's." There was more in similar vein. Did I or did I not sign it? To many, I daresay, the revised wording may seem natural and perhaps more effective; but it would have been impossible in the days of the founding fathers. It might have cost a professor his position. I recall that in a nineteenth-century novel, one of Howells', I think, a dinner party was described. Around the table were a New England editor, a clergyman, and other dignitaries who listened with amusement to the inaccuracies of pronunciation and grammar of a newly rich guest from the West. How turned about is the situation today. Professors, cultivated business men, politicians seem now to fear to be too correct, too dignified. They go out of their way to break from older trammels. We believe in linguistic democracy too. I once heard it stated that it is often hard to tell from their speech a garage or a garbage man from a professor.

If linguistic usage was on the loose in Shakespeare's day, really to the ultimate gain of the language, it is still more on the loose among us. In his day the innovations were largely in the direction of word borrowing from the classical and romance languages. The changes of today, departures and shifts of emphasis, are too many to review. I must restrict my area of comment and shall select one characteristic for especial stress. A tendency that we favor strongly, this in order to save time, compress information, enhance informality, or arrest attention is the tendency to speed up expression without much care as to how we do it. Unmistakable is our urge toward lessening wordage, thereby accelerating tempo. And let me say at once that my intention is not to chide or to praise but merely to state.

## V

What are some of our leading devices for reducing verbal length to the simpler? Most obvious perhaps is our phenomenally increased liking for substituting initials for naming in full. This practice greatly increased after World War I and it is now at its height. Many have commented on it. Tonight I have consciously said MLA instead of Modern Language Association of America. The designation of our society by capital letters only (it may now be written without periods) would hardly have been tolerated in a formal address by our founding fathers. The initials were introduced into the Merriam Webster Unabridged of 1909 by P. W. Long, who worked for Webster's before coming to us as our Secretary. Other dictionaries followed, and MLA is now a standard abridgment

alongside COD, DAR, YMCA and the alphabetical flood ("alphabet soup") that came with the New Deal. To MLA and *PMLA* we may now add FL. The initials sharply distinguish it from its parent organization and give unity to the body of scholars and teachers hitherto scattered in place and effort and suffering from *apartheid*. Such groupings of capital letters do save the utterance of many syllables. If they are pronounceable they often pass into words, as radar (radio detecting and ranging). The learned name for such coinages is acronyms; a popular designation, I think, might well be initialisms. AWOL and SHAPE are other examples. Later dictionaries recognize that AWOL need not always be capitalized but may be "awol." ACTH may go the same way. NATO and SNAFU may be pronounced as words. For GI only initials appear. One never hears "Ji." A. W. Read has shown us that the initials OK were floated in New York City in a presidential campaign of 1840. Often the written words "okay," or "okeh" are preferred. VIP exists as initials only, but UNESCO and UNRRA are spoken as words. Recall too the wartime WACS and WAVES and the English WRENS. One sympathizes with the now classic old lady who complained, "At that distance I could not see whether she was a WAC or a WAVE or a SPAM."

Another factor in the trend toward shrinkage for acceleration is no doubt the influence of the sound films. In these the quantity of words needs watching as much as in a ten-word telegram. Contributing too are the daily telegraphic headlines for the hurried reader. These must be fitted into available space and as a consequence short words, preferably striking ones, are favored. To this we owe the stock ascendancy of tot for child, cops for police, sleuth, graft, loot, and blast for inveigh against. Orb saves two letters over world. Many picturesque locutions such as sob sister, brain washing, trust buster save space effectively. Passing mention only may be made of our tendency to curtail longer words by suppressing initial, medial, or final syllables. No doubt this has always been with us but it gains rather than loses in popularity. To it we owe such abridgments as phone, auto, cab, wiz, gym, Yank. Jefferson may never have appeared in print as Tom but Ike and Winnie are overworked. I have been told that Chi-Coms and Chi-Nats for Chinese communists and nationalists are popular abbreviations in the Pentagon and elsewhere as time-saving.

An especially familiar method of lessening wordage, impossible to overlook, is our contemporary addiction to condensing expression by welding or agglutination. Words are merged, usually leaving their elements distinguishable. This is a stock device in the coining of trade-names. Amalgam trade-names are now thick as Vallombrosa leaves. New devices, gadgets, fabrics, whatnot appear in vast quantities and they have to be

named. Sciences such as chemistry, medicine, sociology, psychology have long created new designations by joining elements involved. When I printed *Blends; Their Relation to English Word-Formation* as far back as 1914, such formations appeared only occasionally, mostly in the wake of Lewis Carroll's coinages such as "chortle," chuckle and snort, "galumphing," galloping and triumphing. Now the device is wildly overworked. The lid is off. A first impulse when a name is to be found for something new is to fall back on conflation. "Conoco" saves many syllables from Continental Oil Company. "Quink" makes a one-syllable name for quick-drying ink. "Vegemato" explains itself. In film and theatrical advertising have appeared such striking and none-too-admirable formations as "stupeficient" (stupendous and magnificent), and "magnossal" (magnificent and colossal). "Chicagorilla" and "terpsicorker" catch the attention readily. A certain highly paid columnist uses this device to the limit, hoping, I suppose, to both daze and faze.

Telescoped formations are coined on higher levels also. They do not always emerge from informal or casual usage or from attempts to arrest attention by departing from the accepted. Dignified circles do not ban them. We are familiar with Benelux, the coined name of an economic union of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg. The formation is acceptable to most persons. It sounds impressive and its first syllable and its last give it something of the dignity of Latinity. Newspapers of the post-war period told of another economic union proposed on the model of Benelux but not carried out, that of France and Italy, to be termed Fritalux. Such a name might have been enough to kill it. Next the Scandinavian nations and England were said at one time to be pondering seriously an economic union to be named Uniscan. Sir Stafford Cripps, I think it was, said in a published item that the name should be Ukiscan (United Kingdom). Neither was accepted. The agglutinated Scandanglia, more intelligible, was suggested by the *London Times*, probably in a spirit of spoof. Before our two wars the proposal of such welded names would have been impossible.

Also not to be overlooked as contributing to verbal shrinkage is the tendency of our time for speech itself to give way to pictures. Picture writing was the primitive means of communication. We revive it as quicker in delivering its message than voice or print. We grow used to thin lines of type, mere trickles of explanation, below or about a photograph. Pictures of all types, dispensing with as much language as may be, face us on billboards and in magazines and are conspicuous features of advertisements. They are supposed to draw immediate attention to what is advertised and they probably do. Thus printed and auditory speech are economized on as though words were obstacles to communi-



cation. To educationists they are time savers, for many learn more quickly from them than from print or speech. The visual helps of maps and charts and photographs play an increasingly larger role. No doubt too the vogue of the pictorial has been helped by the growth by leaps and bounds of amateur photography, and has been helped yet more by the cinema.

I have heard it predicted that such verbal curtailments as the familiar and easily uttered "gotta," "hafta," "wanta" will ultimately find acceptance as standard much as "onto," "always," "already," have agglutinated in the past, with "alright" well on its way. To many this may seem hardly likely; yet their increasing use by cartoonists, radio speakers, and writers of the vernacular in fiction familiarize them more and more. Another tendency, namely the determined mauling of words, deserves passing attention. There have always been word-manipulations for humorous purposes, or amusing folk-etymological formations or dialectal perversions. We go far beyond these now. Our contemporary mutilations of standard words by professional columnists and humorists and by advertisers—this in order to arrest attention, or to give an effect of *grotesquerie*, or to startle through weird spellings—owes much to a New York City character Sime (Simon) Silverman, for a time the editor of the magazine *Variety*. Originally writing ordinary humdrum English, he moved on to a fresh eccentric type of word treatment. It was taken up by his assistants and by disciples such as Winchell. *Time* too and the *New Yorker* have sometimes manipulated standard expressions, compressing for space saving or for accelerated tempo but on a higher plane even when launching blends (cinemaniacs, intelligentsiacs, ballyhooligans). In general will not the weird spellings, eccentric syntax, whimsicalities, distortions, acrobatic flourishes of speech of our word-maulers and would-be humorists of today ultimately grow stale and fade? In any case they give most of us acidosis of the esprit. The exception is Ogden Nash. "It is strange," to quote from a Hollywood magnate, "what some authors auth."

The effects on our prose today of these devices for lessening wordage are not always admirable. The old repose is out of date, transformed into prose that speeds and jerks. Our rhythms are those of talk, fast, raucous, emphatic, fitting the pace of modern life.

What will become of our linguistic heritage if we continue indefinitely our addiction to departing from the established? Will it go the way of one phase of it, Poetry, which seems now to bypass the beautiful in pursuit of the arresting? Or of present-day Art, which also seems to have lost its sensitivity to the beautiful in quest of the striking or the grotesque?

## VI

Alongside and in contrast with the trend toward trenchancy, condensation, compression, abridgment—the extreme reached in the substitution of pictures for language—there exists of course the opposite trend. This is the tendency toward elaboration and expansion, to enhance exactness, precision, perhaps sometimes merely to be impressive. This appears in the technical language of many fields, witness the jargons of science, nuclear phenomena, aviation, education, philology too. Since it comes oftenest into our horizon, the technical jargon of educationists attracts especial critical attention. Law, however, though it is said to have been somewhat simplified of late, is probably the worst offender as regards attenuated expression. From law, I think, derives the language of the Pentagon. As we know, official language tends toward impressive elaboration. A large envelope becomes a brief case, a brief case a portfolio, a portfolio a portmanteau. In official jargon food becomes units of nutritional intake, the poor are the underprivileged or those in lower income brackets. To mend or revive is to recondition, rehabilitate, reactivate. To an educator of high status a baby sitter is the custodial supervisor of juvenile activities and recreation. All is not literature that litters but there is considerable litter about our official language as there is about professional jargons in general. We have cause to know that in an endeavor to be explicit or impressive, officialese is sometimes expanded to the point of being unintelligible. I have often heard Gertrude Stein accused of being unintelligible. I found her title “Tender Buttons” unintelligible. But on occasion she is brief and as lucid as sunshine compared to writers of officialese. Listen to her words on the money question. “The money is always there but the pockets change; it is not in the same pockets after a change, and that is all there is to say about money.”

When looking at an issue of *PMLA* for 1948 I found to my surprise that P. W. Long closed his presidential address with the remark: “and now, as Louise Pound said fifteen years ago at an Old Guard dinner, I sit down on the spur of the moment.” If he was to quote that remark should he not have preceded it by its build-up? I had been reading of Mary Roberts Rinehart’s mother, who regretted, she said, that she came too early to be a teacher or secretary or receptionist and had to “fall back on her needle”—which sounds very uncomfortable. I was glad, I commented, that I came later than Mrs. Roberts, could join an academic faculty, could belong to the MLA, and could attend an Old Guard dinner. Surely following Mrs. Roberts’ remarks about her needle was the appropriate time for any sitting down on the spur of the moment?

## VII

And now I must desert my weed patch and return to the highway, for as last year's president reminded us, "Time will away." I have taken you through no beautiful garden of flowers, displayed no fastidious hot-house plants. I did not promise to do so and I do not apologize. Weeds too have their place in linguistic gardens.

Language is important; its importance can hardly be exaggerated. Everyone has to speak, whatever his race and his native tongue, and everyone is interested in some phase of speech. The "castle" of the humanities may be "attacked," as Carleton Brown phrased it in his fine presidential address of 1936 based on the medieval allegory of Castle Anima. Today science, citizenship, welfare loom large in our foreground, as they should. But they must not be all-engulfing. Harsh words are spoken in these days as regards language, even concerning the study of our mother tongue. Probably many here have heard, as I, such statements as these from the "talent" at educational conferences: "English should be a branch of social science," "The main business of the English teacher is to teach citizenship," "What have Shakespeare and Milton for the modern world?" "Young children should not be taught by separate subjects but be taught their relation to others and to society."

After all it is in language that science, citizenship, education, welfare are recorded, as well as are history, fiction, drama, poetry. People will always be word conscious. I have faith that in a civilized society there will always be some such organization for the promotion of investigation, discussion, and comradely intercourse as our venerable and cherished MLA, with its gatherings at which scholars of distinction may be seen and heard, ideas exchanged, new ones gained, others qualified or discarded, and at which old friendships may be renewed and new ones formed. On an MLA program in 1898, I am here tonight as 1956 impends. No doubt some among you in this audience will expect me to reappear on a program of about 1975. I trust not, but I make no promises.

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA