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Of Relevance, Relatedness, and Reorientation

Excerpts from the 1968
Presidential Address

Douglas Ehninger

I assume, Madam Chairman, that in reinstating the presidential address as a regular part of our national convention programs, it was your intention that at some time during the days we are assembled the president should undertake to report to the membership his observations concerning the present state and future prospects of the field of speech.

What, then, shall I say of the state of our field as we approach the close of this year 1968?

First, I should first like to report that everywhere I have gone during the past year I have sensed in all areas of our field a high degree of intellectual life and vigor, combined with a seriousness of scholarly purpose. Not within my memory, which now extends back through more than thirty-five years of our professional history, has there been a time when more or more exciting ideas have been abroad or when more books and monographs of all sorts have appeared or have been in preparation. Admittedly, our publications vary considerably in quality, and we continue to produce many more textbooks and anthologies than original scholarly works. But an increasing percentage of these instructionally oriented materials are of genuine merit and, on the whole I should say, represent a considerable advance over the general level of such publications in earlier years.

Second, as one surveys the field of speech communication today an unprecedented concern with research and research-related activities is everywhere apparent. Along with our sister disciplines we have located with amazing rapidity the pipelines from which the largess of Washington flows, and we now are beginning to find our way to the resources of the private foundations. More important than this acquired expertise in grantsmanship, however, is the fact that our research of all types—historical, critical, and behavioral—is steadily improving in quality and sophistication, so that certain studies which two or three decades ago seemed to

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SAA AWARDS PRESENTED

The fourth annual SAA Golden Anniversary Prize Fund Awards for scholarly publications were presented at the convention luncheon in Chicago on December 29. The recipients were selected by an Awards Committee composed of Professors Oscar G. Brockett, Thomas M. Scheidel and Eugene E. White, who served as Chairman. Professor Brockett announced the Awards as follows:

\$500 BOOK AWARDS:

Karl R. Wallace, University of Massachusetts, for *Francis Bacon on the Nature of Man*, University of Illinois Press, 1967.

Don Geiger, University of California at Berkeley, for *The Dramatic Impulse in Modern Poetics*, Louisiana State University Press, 1967.

\$100 AWARDS:

M. James Young, University of Massachusetts, for "The York Pageant Wagon," *Speech Monographs*, XXXIV (March 1967), 1-20.

Franklyn S. Haiman, Northwestern University, for "The Rhetoric of the Streets: Some Legal and Ethical Considerations," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, LIII (April 1967), 99-114.

Vincent M. Bevilacqua, University of Massachusetts, for "Baconian Influences in the Development of Scottish Rhetorical Theory," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, III (August 1967), 212-218; "James Beattie's Theory of Rhetoric," *Speech Monographs*, XXXIV (June 1967), 109-124; "Alexander Gerard's Lectures on Rhetoric: Edinburgh University Library MS. De. 5. 61," *Speech Monographs*, XXXIV (August 1967), 384-388.

The 1969 Awards Committee will consider books and articles by SAA members published during 1968.

CHICAGO, 1968

Despite very unfavorable weather, the "Hong Kong Flu" epidemic, and what appears to have been a limited protest boycott, nearly 2000 members gathered in Chicago for the 54th annual SAA convention, December 27-30. In due time, the official proceedings of the Administra-

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The Search for Excellence

Marie H. Nichols, SAA President

It is many years since, on a cold winter day, I boarded a train to Chicago, headed for a week-end of talk with Professor Ernest Wrage of Northwestern, now deceased. At the time, I was vice-chairman of the Interest Group in Rhetoric and Public Address, and Professor Wrage was chairman. At an SAA Convention, just past, we had been roundly defeated in an attempt to introduce the principle of control into convention programing. We could both still hear the strains of an argument: "I would rather hear Professor X, who has made no previous preparation, than hear someone who has prepared, but who has nothing to say." With a particular referent in mind—and there was a particular referent—it seemed like a pretty solid argument. We might exclude some of our wisest counselors who would not prepare



Marie H. Nichols

their convention remarks in advance. At any rate, we had been defeated, and, as the new vice-chairman, I was to have free hand in preparing the convention program of the RPA Interest Group for the next convention. At the time, I knew that I had considerably more freedom than I had knowledge and discipline in the matter of convention programing; hence the trip to see Professor Wrage. We spent a

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us sound and imaginative, now appear incredibly naive in purpose or design.

Third, as one attends our meetings and reads our literature he cannot help but recognize that our traditional limits and perimeters as a discipline have long since been dissolved and we are moving boldly into areas of inquiry and teaching which hardly were thought of twenty-five or thirty years ago. Psycholinguistics, experimental aesthetics, cross-cultural communication, and comparative rhetoric are only a few of the course titles which would sound strange indeed to teachers of an earlier generation.

As part of this expansion into new areas of learning, our college curricula, on both the graduate and undergraduate levels, are growing in breadth and are undergoing significant internal adjustments. Individual departments are moving in a variety of directions. All of these reforms, however, though differing in specifics, have in common the characteristic of striking a new balance between the development of skills, on the one hand, and the teaching of substance or content, on the other; between enhancing the student's own competencies as an oral communicator and exploring with him the nature and ramifications of the communication process. As a result, viewed in the large, it seems to me incontestable that we are much less performance oriented today than we have been at any time in our immediate past, and that in the future this more healthy balance between skills and content promises to be preserved.

Fourth, although obviously we still face very serious problems in recruitment—problems complicated at least for the present by the uncertain draft status of graduate students—I am happy to report that one of the most gratifying aspects of this worrisome office has been the opportunity it has afforded to broaden my acquaintance with the young men and women who are just entering our field. Certainly, they are an impressive lot—so much better prepared and so much more knowledgeable than the graduate students of my generation; so impatient with shallowness in scholarship and ineptitude in research, and, as they unhesitatingly make clear, so impatient with what they regard as unwarranted conservatism on the part of the "establishment." One cannot have sat through the week-long New Orleans Conference on Research and Development last February without gaining the impression that the future of our field is in good hands.

Fifth, and perhaps most important of all, everywhere I have gone this year I have found persistent questioning about the nature of our field—about what we are and what we ought to become. Are we by

nature one discipline or many? Does the oral act, as such, furnish a unifying focus for all of our interests and activities? Should we properly be called Speech, or Communication, or Speech Communication—and that with or without the hyphen? Should our departments be organized so as to encourage breadth or to promote specialization? Do we properly belong in Colleges of Fine Arts, in Schools of Journalism and Communication, or in Divisions of Language and Literature? Shall we or shall we not prescribe curricula and set up standards for certifying teachers? What should be our stance socially and politically? Should we, through our professional organizations, announce a position on public issues? Should we protest, impose sanctions, and promote legislation, or should we maintain the traditional scholarly posture of objective detachment? What are our obligations in those situations where freedom of speech or of assembly appears to have been restricted? How can our inherited goals and methods of instruction be adapted to current needs and problems?

As one listens to this persistent questioning and observes the earnestness with which answers are sought, he cannot but conclude that the field of speech in this year 1968 is in a period of very fundamental transition—a period when old assumptions are being reappraised, old perimeters are crumbling, and old values are giving way to new.

Because we are in a period of transition—a period when horizons are expanding and values are in question—it is not surprising that new challenges press in upon us and that old ones take on a fresh sense of urgency. Times of change are inevitably times of challenge—times when we see more clearly the many things we have left undone and realize more fully the importance of striking out in new directions.

But if upon the basis of my observations while an officer of this Association, I were to assign priorities to the field as a whole—were to name those things which as a profession it seems to me most important we turn our attention to as we move into 1969 and the years ahead; those things upon which the future health and prosperity of the field of speech communication most directly depend—I would name three.

First, it seems to me, we must in all areas and at all levels meet and surmount the challenge of giving our research and instruction a maximum of social relevance.

Because speech as an academic subject first flowered and has always found its most congenial habitat in the predominantly Protestant Anglo-Saxon Middle West, we have traditionally been a WASPish profession. Indeed, even today a demographic analysis of SAA member-

ship undoubtedly would show proportionately fewer representatives of minority groups—fewer Catholics, Jews, and Latins, and certainly far fewer Blacks—than are to be found in our population as a whole.

As a result of this narrow class structure, more often than not our professional concerns have been those of a particular social or ethnic group. In our textbooks and classes, and even to a certain extent in the problems we have chosen to research, we have reflected this group's needs and values. We have stressed "public" at the expense of private or interpersonal communication; we have emphasized the importance of speech training as a factor in social and economic success; we have placed among the leading *topoi* of our rhetorics the upper middle class values of initiative, self-reliance, and freedom of opportunity. In short, we have assumed that it is both the desire and the duty of every man to succeed in business or a profession, to love his neighbor as his brother, and to honor the democratic institutions of discussion and the ballot box as the only acceptable methods of effecting change. In those few instances in which we have reached out to embrace minority groups within our instruction we have been little interested in adapting our assumptions and values to theirs and more concerned with bringing them within our own orbit—with correcting what we have regarded as a foreign or deviant dialect, a substandard grammar, or a wrong-headed notion concerning the role that communication should play in a peaceful society.

Today, somewhat belatedly, we are discovering that our traditional way of viewing things no longer will do—that the needs and values to which historically we have ministered no longer are acceptable to growing segments of our population; that the attitudes and skills we have inculcated into our students hinder rather than help them when they attempt to communicate across class or race lines to individuals who are in some way different from themselves; that much of our research, concerned as it is with resurrecting speakers and theories of remote periods and places, seems trivial or irrelevant in the face of the immense social problems which confront us.

These problems, we recognize, nearly always have a communication component—nearly always in part arise or at least are complicated by the failure on the part of one party to make its views clear to the other; by its inability to say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time. Moreover, we recognize that when communication is blocked or breaks down—when it fails to carry the message or light the light—the chances are that talk will be replaced by violence; that words and arguments will give way to brick-bats and bullets.

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In short, today as never before teachers of speech are faced by a challenge—a challenge to give our work at all levels and in all areas a new measure of social relevance; to search out what we as professed experts in the processes of communication can do to facilitate understanding among men and between factions; to replace divisiveness and war with consubstantiality and peace; to study not only how to make ideas safe for people, but how to make people safe for ideas.

My second recommendation, is that we respond to the problem of relatedness by building between the various divisions and subdivisions of our field new bridges of understanding and appreciation.

Among the forces which have propelled us toward separatism, perhaps the most important is the dramatic explosion of knowledge which has occurred in all divisions of our field, particularly since the close of World War II. As a result of this explosion it has become the exception rather than the rule for any individual to work in more than one of these divisions, and, indeed, even to master more than a fraction of his chosen field. Moreover, as interests have narrowed and specialization has increased, there has been an understandable tendency for persons in the various specialities to move closer to scholars in neighboring disciplines and to loosen their ties with colleagues in other branches of speech communication. Thus the specialist in dramatic theory moves toward the student of literature and criticism, the speculative rhetorician toward the philosopher, and the communication theorist toward the psychologist, while the speech pathologist increasingly finds himself at home in a medical environment.

The movements in these directions are evidenced not only by the appearance of new journals in which two or more disciplines are bridged, but also by an inspection of our curricula. For while on the undergraduate level our offerings in argumentation, acting, voice training, and the like continue to be unique, once the graduate level is reached, in title, if not always in content, our courses often are indistinguishable from courses in journalism, sociology, and English.

But whatever internal forces have been operating to drive our field apart have found a fertile soil for growth within the new mega-university where, because of complexity of structure and sheer physical size, persons in the various areas of speech communication frequently are placed in different administrative units, as well as separated physically.

Add to these forces the established independence of our three major national associations and the further splintering with which each of them now is threatened,

and it seems unrealistic to me to pretend that in the years immediately ahead the trend toward separatism can effectively be halted. Unified departments may for a period of time continue to exist in our smaller and middle-sized institutions where the composition of the staff or the nature of the student body makes them especially desirable. And, undoubtedly, for some years to come delaying or rear-guard actions will be fought in some of our larger universities. On every hand, however, the evidence strongly suggests that no more than temporary success can be achieved.

Considering the picture in the large, therefore, I would hope that as a field, instead of bemoaning what some may regard as a happier past or indicting one another for opportunities lost and mistakes made, we address ourselves to working out an accommodation to the situation as it now exists—expressed in terms of the figure which I used in introducing this discussion, that we replace the old bridges of departmental unity with new ones of interdepartmental cooperation and understanding. For, surely, there is much for all of us to gain by keeping such bridges open, and there is much we can do to promote this end. We can join together in programs in which specialists from the various areas and subareas contribute of their expert knowledge and skills to train broadly based generalists for teaching positions in the elementary and secondary schools. We can cooperate in research ventures in such fields as experimental aesthetics, language analysis, and speech development, where the specialized knowledge of humanist and behaviorist, or theatre scholar and statistician, of experimental phonetician and speech pathologist are called for. We can impress upon our students the fact that learning about communication in its fullest range entails a consideration of its dimensions aesthetically, scientifically, and pragmatically. We can insure by means of appropriate core courses for both undergraduates and graduates that they come to appreciate the concerns which their area of concentration have in common with the others and how, at bottom, all facets of our field and all research methods used to explore those facets are related. We can develop as part of our national and regional organizations advisory councils on which persons from areas and disciplines contiguous to our own keep us informed of trends and developments. We can, by continued investigation into the nature of transmissive processes and the gradual evolution of a comprehensive theory of communication come better to understand how we are related and why we have drifted apart. And, finally, and perhaps most important of all, we can by word and act show that we appreciate the contributions which are being made by persons who pursue spe-

cialities and employ research methods that are different from our own. In the past, certainly, there has been entirely too much tendency to write the other fellow's work off as unscientific, unscholarly, or inhumane.

The third and last of my recommendations to the field of speech communication as it moves into the year 1969 concerns our Association itself and how it might more effectively contribute to the cultural reorientation which is the theme of this convention program.

Those of you who shared in the debates of the Legislative Assembly on Friday are aware, I know, of the specific problems involved in attempting to conduct the day-to-day affairs of the Association under our present constitution and by-laws: the ambiguities concerning the rights and obligations of Interest Groups, the absence of clear lines of authority between the Assembly and Council and the Council and Executive Committee, the cumbersome and inefficient program planning procedure, the gray areas of responsibility between the elected officers and the professional office staff, a checks and balances system in which the Council, a body which meets for a few hours only once a year, is the final authority on most legislative, executive and judicial questions.

Rather than detailing such technical and procedural matters here, however, I should like to sum up the problem of our government as I and your other officers see it under two more general heads. First, our present constitution and by-laws were devised for an Association far smaller in size, simpler in function, and more restricted in services than the Association that exists today: an Association without a permanent national office staff or fourteen persons; without extensive contract undertakings with the federal government; without such major and semi-autonomous administrative agencies as the Research Board, the Educational Policies Board, and the Publications Committee; with a budget only a fraction of the size of our budget today; with a narrower and less venturesome publications program; and with officers who served more as occasional ceremonial functionaries than as persons who for a period of three years make a major commitment of time and energy to the affairs of the SAA.

But, second and even more importantly, without in any way detracting from the able and imaginative work of Wilbur Gilman, Madge Kramer, and the other framers of our present documents, it must be recognized that in creating the Interest Group structure, in vesting the legislative or policy making power of the Association in a large and fluctuating body representing diverse specialities and points

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of view—in developing, in short, what we have come to refer to as the “canopy” or “umbrella” concept—the Gilman constitution sought to adapt the Association’s structure to the field of speech as it existed in the year 1950, together with the hopes and ambitions we then had to retain within our fold segments which have since declared or are now threatening to declare their independence. Moreover, by diffusing power widely and making amendment difficult, this constitution, in effect, froze this structure—imposed it upon the Association in such a way that over the years the meeting of new needs and the grasping of new opportunities has become increasingly difficult. As a result, today rather than occupying a position of leadership—instead of being able to influence in a significant way the directions our research and instruction should take in order to effect the reorientation we seek—the Association is at best in a position of followership and at worst is lagging sadly behind developments within the field.

We have not, for example, moved to meet the needs of those members of our Association who long have asked for a realistic policy on standards and certification; we have lagged for years on the matter of name change; we have not served adequately the interests of persons whose concern with communication extends beyond the limits of the oral act; we have neglected the development of services and programs for the junior college; we have failed to maintain useful lines of communication among our proliferating Interest Groups—a factor which in itself has promoted separatism and tended to make us a honeycomb of individual interests and ambitions rather than a philosophically unified discipline; we have let our relations with our sister scholarly associations in the field of speech deteriorate and atrophy.

With the major divisions of theatre and speech and hearing long since departed, and with increasing signs of restiveness in the area of behavioral and linguistic studies, broadcasting, and even of philosophical rhetoric, it is not inconceivable that unless we act promptly and in a bold and imaginative way to restructure our Association, in future years it may become little more than a chance collection of that handful of interests and specialties which have lacked either the strength or the initiative to strike out on their own.

It is for these reasons that I am particularly pleased to be able to report that the Legislative Assembly has approved a plan whereby a committee of the Council, drawing widely upon advice solicited from persons in all parts of the country, will during the course of the next year frame a proposal for new governing instruments for the Association. These proposals will

Finance, continued from page 6

Estimated Income 1968–69 with Estimated 1969–70 Income

(Actual 1967–68 Income Given for Comparison)

	Audited Income 1967–68	Budget 1968–69	Recommended Budget 1969–70
Regular Membership	\$ 78,602.	\$ 85,000.	\$ 91,000.
Student Membership	5,545.	4,000.	6,000.
Sustaining Membership	16,968.	18,000.	21,000.
Library Subscriptions	60,790.	63,000.	66,600.
Institutional Membership	5,077.	5,000.	6,000.
Miscellaneous Publication Sales (incl. Directory & Spectra)	15,494.	17,600.	18,600.
Back Issue Sales (The Johnson Cos.)	5,925.	6,000.	6,500.
Placement Service	18,009.	19,000.	19,000.
Advertising			
<i>Quarterly Journal of Speech</i>	13,327.	13,500.	14,500.
<i>Speech Teacher</i>	5,534.	5,500.	6,500.
<i>Directory</i>	6,436.	6,500.	7,500.
Convention			
Program/Exhibits	12,588.	13,000.	14,000.
Receipts	9,473.	13,000.	13,000.
Interest	3,562.	4,000.	2,000.
Royalty	3,114.	3,500.	4,000.
CIDD	13,816.	14,000.	15,000.
Special Projects	2,096.	2,500.	3,500.
Miscellaneous Income	687.	1,000.	1,100.
TOTAL GROSS INCOME	\$277,043.	\$294,100.	\$315,700.
Subscription Agency, 5,175 } Less Discounts	7,061.	7,000.	7,500.
Advertising 1,886 }			
TOTAL NET INCOME	\$269,982.	\$287,100.	\$308,200.

be submitted to a Constitutional Conference of fifty democratically elected Association members who will meet at the time of the New York convention next Christmas. If approved by this Conference, early in 1970 the documents will be circulated among the entire membership to be voted upon by mail ballot, and if in this final step they receive majority approval will go into effect on July 1, 1970.

I ask for your cooperation at all stages of this process and encourage you to make your views known to the members of the committee and of the Constitutional Conference. I urge you to discuss the needs and opportunities of the Association with colleagues and friends, and to examine with a view to modification or amendment the documents that are framed. Personally, I can think of no greater service that any of us can perform both for our Association and for our field, and no greater way in which we can contribute to the social and cultural reorientation which we so earnestly seek.

In summary, then, I have urged relevance, relatedness, and reorientation. I have argued that our field is in a period of transition and that we must move energetically to meet the challenges which this state of affairs presents. I have faith in our

ability to do so and in the future of speech as an academic discipline. It has been a privilege to serve as your president and to contribute in so far as I could to the progress of the work in which we all believe.

SAA at NCTE

Thomas L. Fernandez, *Monmouth College*, organized and chaired on behalf of SAA a meeting at the National Council of Teachers of English November convention in Milwaukee entitled, “Oral Interpretation in the Teaching of English.” Wallace A. Bacon, *Northwestern University*, presented a paper, “The Act of Literature and the Act of Interpretation,” and Frances L. McCurdy, *University of Missouri*, spoke on the topic, “Oral Interpretation: An Approach to Literature.” Discussants included Evelyn R. Work, *Monmouth High School* and Jeremy McNamara, *Monmouth College*.

Robert W. Vogelsang, Washington State University, should have been included in the roster of SAA members who participated in the August convention of the Canadian Speech Association.