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The Poetic Legacy of Archibald MacLeish
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Much has been written about the possible heresy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's appointment of Archibald MacLeish as Librarian of Congress in 1939. While it can be argued that it was truly visionary of Roosevelt to appoint MacLeish, with his stellar credentials, even if none in library studies, we now know that the President had other motives for the appointment and MacLeish himself was a very reluctant nominee. Once confirmed by the Senate, however, MacLeish instituted far-reaching changes and wrote and lectured passionately about the role of librarians and libraries in that wartime era. What has been less emphasized in library literature, however, was his longing, above all, to be a poet and in doing so to define the role of poetry in our lives. After reviewing letters, essays and interviews, it is clear that this passion to be a poet above everything else plagued him from his student years and influenced all his decisions in accepting positions as an attorney, editor at *Fortune* magazine, curator of the Nieman Collection of Journalism at Harvard, Librarian of Congress, Assistant Secretary of State, U.S. delegate to the establishment of UNESCO and finally, as an educator. Therefore, this legacy of elevating the role of poet and poetry in itself makes MacLeish worthy of being deemed a profound influence in the culture and history of American libraries.

The tension of finding time to devote to being a poet and writer is described repeatedly in MacLeish's letters, essays and interviews. He has recounted staying up late one night with his wife Ada to decide whether he should quit practicing law and move to

Paris with his young family to write poetry. He recalls walking home that evening, seeing the moon and deciding that “[i]t was for me the moon was waiting” (*Riders* 73). In his memoir his son William writes that after his father’s death he came upon a prose poem that dealt with that evening. He surmised that the elderly MacLeish had at one time recalled that memory and crafted the prose poem:

...here he was asking the moon, ‘What do I owe? For what? To whom?’ He was telling the moon how hard he had worked, how hard it was to find time for his writing...And, at the end [of the poem]: ‘I had prepared, made arrangements for the time to come, for work to come: There is no art to come: there’s only art--the need, the now, the presence, the necessity...It was the art I owed’ (*Uphill* 46).

In an essay, written in the late sixties or early seventies, MacLeish confessed that “[c]onversations with the moon go on and on. Sometimes sixty years or longer” (*Riders* 81).

By the end of that evening years earlier, however, he and his wife made the decision that he should quit practicing law. In an incredible coincidence, when he got to his office to resign the next day, he was greeted by the senior partner and the entire firm. They had planned to announce his election as partner. Like Henry Luce at *Fortune* magazine later in his career, the senior partner did not easily forgive MacLeish for his decision to be a poet. President Roosevelt would make it even more difficult to pursue his passion when he decided to nominate him for Librarian of Congress in 1939.

In response to the letter Felix Frankfurter forwarded recommending him highly to Roosevelt, MacLeish revealed his conflicts in trying to be a poet. At that time he thought that it was Frankfurter, a friend from Harvard and Roosevelt’s appointee to the Supreme Court, who initiated the recommendation for the position. He learned much later,

however, that Roosevelt himself decided to nominate him for Librarian of Congress. In that letter, thanking Frankfurter for his effusive praise in recommending him to Roosevelt, MacLeish's decision to decline the appointment is clear and decisive. He writes that during his "adult life I have been plagued by the fact that I seem to be able to do more or less well things which don't commonly go together" (*Letters* 299). He then describes in painful detail the negative reactions of others when he decided to live the life of a poet. His friends "thought I was leaving an active life which I might do well for the life of an artist in which I was not apt to do well because I was not the kind of person with whom the word artist is commonly associated" (299). MacLeish continues in his letter that "I think I was made to suffer as acutely over my decision to quit the law for poetry as it is possible to make any man suffer over any decision in his own life" (299). Frankfurter is also told about MacLeish's earlier decision to turn down the editorship of *Fortune* to go to Harvard to be the first curator of the Nieman Foundation, a position which was part-time and gave him an opportunity to continue writing. Apparently Henry Luce's acerbic response was still memorable for him.

MacLeish also tried to appeal to Frankfurter's own diverse interests and stated that "you will understand as few other men could possibly understand that an ability to get along in the world does not argue an inability to practice an art" (300). He continues by saying that "[f]urthermore, being a man who loves art as he loves life, you will understand why the practice of art seems to be the thing I must do" (300). Near the end of the letter MacLeish queries whether at this point in his life, however, he should consider public service. He answers his own question in the end saying that he wouldn't

be effective in public service because “the one thing I ever wanted to do with all my heart was to write poetry and the one thing I ever wanted to be was a poet” (300). It is fascinating to read the postscript to this letter telling Frankfurter that he just received a telephone call from the White House inviting him to have lunch with Roosevelt. He asks Frankfurter for his advice on whether he should accept the invitation since it was obvious what Roosevelt intended to discuss and MacLeish would be taking up his time over a decision he had already made.

Less than two weeks later, after the first meeting with Roosevelt, MacLeish wrote him a letter declining the position of Librarian of Congress. He noted that he had initially destroyed two versions of a letter accepting the position but, in the end, decided that “[m]y trade is poetry and poetry, though it is a non-continuous operation, is nevertheless a time-consuming operation” (301).

After that first letter, MacLeish was invited yet again for another luncheon meeting. In a series of interviews which spanned a six-year period from 1976 to 1981, MacLeish shared his recollections of that meeting where Roosevelt talked about his vision for the Library of Congress, what it “could be, ought to be (he saw it as a great, quasi-educational organization and not for scholars, but the country at large---fleets of Library of Congress bookmobiles in the illiterate South; he had a real vision of it), I couldn’t say no” (Reflections 130). In answering whether that came to fruition MacLeish replied that “[i]t never happened because the war happened” and no one dealt with it afterwards regardless of the war (130-31). MacLeish also went on to speculate what could have been possible. With the folklore center at the Library of Congress they could have gone, for example, into prisons and recorded songs of “all the Negro singers among

the prisoners...and that opens up the whole black community to you, where your memories are” (131).

After that second meeting MacLeish wrote President Roosevelt another letter accepting the nomination. The Senate eventually confirmed his appointment by an overwhelming margin. Before that confirmation, however, MacLeish was treated to a barrage of criticism by, among others, the American Library Association.

In his article about MacLeish, Frederick J. Stielow describes in the journal *Libraries and Culture* the virulent opposition by the ALA. He quotes the outgoing president who had written that “MacLeish could not qualify for the librarianship of any collection or public library in America which attempts to maintain professional standards” (Stielow 514). At a summer conference the ALA also circulated a petition among its members protesting that a MacLeish nomination amounted to a “calamity” (514). Stielow also writes about the eventual “rapprochement” between the ALA and its executive secretary, Carl Milam, ALA’s choice for the position, with MacLeish. As relations improved, they found their wartime activism meshed ideologically. In a particularly charged statement, for example, MacLeish wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1940 that “[l]ibrarians are keepers....of the men’s watch upon the world and on themselves. In such a time as ours, when wars are made against the spirit and its works, the keeping of its records is itself a kind of warfare” (Stielow 520).

While Stielow writes that it was the rancor of the ALA and its “tactics” that made MacLeish re-think his stance and accept the appointment, in an interview much later MacLeish rejected that notion. Besides the grand plans Roosevelt outlined, as mentioned earlier, MacLeish stated that “Mr. Roosevelt, as he could, turned on a combination of

charm and authority that was absolutely irresistible” (*Reflections* 130). To further counter the argument that it was the ALA diatribes that made him commit to the position, MacLeish recalled a telephone call from a Keyes Metcalf (131). He was calling on behalf of the ALA from its convention in San Francisco. After being asked to reconsider his acceptance, MacLeish challenged Metcalf by saying that how could he change his mind when he had already given his acceptance to the President and the action was before the Senate. MacLeish seemed to imply that it was a matter of honor to keep his word. Later MacLeish would refer to Metcalf as “one of the great librarians of the generation” who would ultimately offer to serve as a consultant in MacLeish’s reorganization of the Library of Congress (Champion xi).

Despite what Stielow and Metcalf claimed and what MacLeish denied much later in his life as to the impetus for his acceptance, it is clear that MacLeish was very reluctant to give up his writing for the Library of Congress position. He had mentioned to Roosevelt in his first meeting that he felt the position required a long term involvement and not one to which he was committed because of his duty to his poetry. It wouldn’t be improper to note at this juncture that he probably mentioned the 40-year tenure of his predecessor. MacLeish was also aware of the tremendous responsibility of revamping the Library of Congress. As he later recalled, it was not his predecessor’s decision to retire after 40 years and more the disgruntled staff at the Library of Congress over conditions that was the impetus for change. Despite his luring MacLeish to Washington with his grand visions, however, Roosevelt had other designs for MacLeish.

When Roosevelt tried to persuade MacLeish to accept the librarian position, he promised that he could be done with the business of the position “before breakfast”

and could then concentrate on his writing (*Reflections* 130) As MacLeish had predicted, however, the responsibilities were enormous. To counter the argument that Roosevelt was a visionary for the Library of Congress, it is clear that, in getting MacLeish into government, he could have him serve concurrently in other wartime positions such heading the Office of Facts and Figures from 1941 to 1942 and its replacement, the Office of War Information from 1942 to 1943.

In his memoir *Uphill with Archie* William MacLeish offers his version of his father's reluctance to accept the nomination and Roosevelt's motives. He notes that Roosevelt had become acquainted with his father through Henry Luce and had also read several of his writings. His son then wryly observes:

In 1939 [Roosevelt] had a slot to fill, that of Librarian of Congress, and he thought Archie could fill it before breakfast and spend the rest of his time doing for the President what he was so good at doing on his own---jousting against what he saw as the tendency of so many powerful Americans to turn ostrich in the face of economic crisis at home and totalitarian threat overseas. So Roosevelt checked his idea with Felix Frankfurter, whom he had just named to the Supreme Court, got back a glowing response, and went after his man. 'The President,' Archie told me much later, 'decided that I wanted to be the Librarian of Congress' (*Uphill* 141).

William MacLeish also describes a letter his father received from Roosevelt dated June 6, 1939, which, by then faded, is framed and hanging on the younger MacLeish's wall. Roosevelt began the letter by stating that "[i]t is one of those curious facts that when I got your first letter I took to my bed with a severe attack of indigestion---and that when your second came I found myself able to rise and resume my normal life" (141). His son then painfully remembers his father's comments that "I have never wanted to write as much as I do at the moment" (142). William MacLeish, in continuing to describe the contents of the letter mentions Roosevelt assuring his father that he will be able to have

time to write and “travel to distant parts where you could also improve your knowledge of ancient literature” (142). He suggests MacLeish become acquainted with the inscriptions of Easter Island’s stone structures and compare them to the sheepskin writing in Tibet. At the end of the letter Roosevelt, in continuing his suggestion to travel to Tibet, adds that “[i]f you do go on such a trip, I would like to go along as cabin boy and will guarantee that I will not interrupt the Muse when she is flirting with you’ (163). It is difficult to be cynical about those comments from a President burdened by years of weathering the Depression and facing the prospect of war.

It is interesting that, when he was much older, MacLeish was asked what further discussions about the Library he had with Roosevelt after his appointment. He answered that he and the President never discussed the Library of Congress after he assumed his post. MacLeish went on to comment that all they talked about were “matters in connection first of all with aspects of the growing crisis at home, and then in connection with the war” (*Reflections* 131).

Much later, in an interview, MacLeish was asked to comment on his work with the information agencies Roosevelt appointed him to head during his stint at the Library of Congress. He answered that he “hated the information work [where] in war you were always on the edge of propaganda” (155). He resigned as head of the Office of War Information in 1943 over “policy differences” and to devote more of his attention to the Library of Congress (*Letters* 313n). He has stated that he also decided to leave the Library of Congress in 1944 because “I couldn’t go on pretending to be Librarian of Congress and not be Librarian of Congress and that the Library of Congress would be there long after....I left” (*Reflections* 155). In his letter of resignation which he submitted

to Roosevelt on November 8, 1944, he stated that “[w]hen you did me the honor to appoint me to this position five years ago, I left work of my own unfinished to which I should now like to return” (*Letters* 124). Less than one month later Roosevelt announced MacLeish’s nomination as assistant secretary of state. Roosevelt, again, had different plans for him. Asked much later whether he felt at that time that this appointment would even further postpone his return to poetry, MacLeish replied that “[i]t obviously would” (*Reflections* 160).

The only way he could explain Roosevelt’s motives was that “[h]e wanted to have help from a few people whose minds he knew and whose minds worked more or less the way he did on certain points in the department” (160). MacLeish further explained that “I think this was an idea that came to him, not in response to my request to be relieved because he certainly didn’t relieve me; he put me into a much more difficult job than any I’d ever held before. I think that was probably how his mind worked” (161).

It is with great irony that, for a man whose intent was to leave public office and resume writing, he was again challenged about his credentials to be in the State Department because he was a poet. In the hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate MacLeish recounted that it was going “very nicely, very pleasantly” (161). He had answered, to its satisfaction, their questions about the fascist issue in Spain of which he had written numerous articles from early in the thirties. Then, after morning and afternoon sessions, a man he would refer to as “that certain senator from Missouri” entered the room and waved a small volume of MacLeish’s poetry he had written at Yale. When asked by the chairman if he had a comment, Senator Bennett Champ then stated, “Well, since you asked me, yes. I would be interested to know

whether this committee feels that a man who wrote a poem, which I am about to read to you, is qualified to be the assistant secretary of state of the United States of America” (161). He then read the love poem written for MacLeish’s future wife Ada with much flourish and, when he was finished, the hearing room was silent. Senator “Happy” Chandler of Kentucky [whom MacLeish later acknowledged became a friend when he was at the Library of Congress] then jumped from his seat and asked the chairman if he could ask MacLeish a question: “Mr. MacLeish, was it left halfback or end you played on the famous Yale football team?” (161). His answer seemed to allay any doubts of the committee. MacLeish, confirmed by the Senate, again postponed his return to his writing. In an essay titled “Moonlighting on Yale Field,” MacLeish, revealing his wit, sardonic or not, recounted that encounter in his own way:

I do not suggest that football was regarded by the [Committee] as an antidote for poetry. The Committee (I have profound respect for the Senate of the United States) understood that poetry has no need of antidotes being itself the most powerful of all antidotes for the most grievous of all human ills---human mortality. But poetry is one thing and men who write poems are another and no Senate Committee with a proper respect for the political future of its members would willingly confirm for public office a man who was known to perpetrate poems *unless* there were ameliorating circumstances. Football was the ameliorating circumstance in my case (*Riders* 98).

MacLeish also recalled, in another essay, returning to Harvard 30 years after graduating from its law school, as a professor of poetry. He was then invited by several law clubs, not to be honored, but “to explain myself” (*Riders* 82). As a former editor of the *Law Review* the students felt that MacLeish “had no right to turn himself into a poet” (82). MacLeish discusses in depth the differences and similarities between the law and

poetry. In the end, however, he states that “[t]he business of the law is to make sense of the confusion of what we call human life---to reduce it to order but at the same time to give it possibility, scope, even dignity” (85). As to the “business of poetry” MacLeish answers that it is “[p]recisely to make sense of the chaos of our lives. To create the understanding of our lives. To compose an order which the bewildered, angry man can recognize. To imagine man” (86).

Despite protestations from MacLeish that he was “tired of pretending to be Librarian of Congress,” numerous articles and his own book *Champion of a Cause* are testimony to the far-reaching changes he instituted while Librarian of Congress, from raising salaries to records keeping to elevating the status of libraries in general. As discussed, MacLeish, before and after he was Librarian of Congress, never wavered in his determination to be a poet, to define poetry and to encourage Americans to revel in it. In *Poetry and Experience* he explains the poetry of Lu Chi. From him, MacLeish argues, there is “the assumption that our deepest human need is to make sense of our lives, and the proposition that poetry is one--- and in some ways the most effective---of the means by which life can be brought to sense” (149). At another time MacLeish, in an interview, was asked what subjects students should be taught in a democratic society. The interviewer queried whether it was history. MacLeish replied that he would add poetry to the teaching of history:

What poetry, a constant reading of poetry, keeps alive in any reader, young or old, is a sense of human dignity, the importance of the human creature. After all, poetry is the inward of the thing that history is the outward of. Poetry is constantly examining the human possibility. It is constantly examining the emotional life, which is by far the most important part of human life. It’s constantly in search of the question of man. What is man? What is man? What is man? History sees the end result. It sees what

happens when a Franco collapses power down on a country like Spain. Poetry is inside that and sees what the destroyed possibility would have been, because a great part of our past is our past failures (*Reflections* 142).

Archibald MacLeish has given librarians, current and prospective, the mandate to collect, preserve and champion poetry. Facing the daunting task of librarianship, we can look to MacLeish for vision and inspiration. Were we to make patrons lovers of poetry, all would be richer for the experience. Let us call for more poetry workshops and competitions, invite poets to read in our libraries and to participate in lectures where they share their own vision. Let us also introduce our patrons to our Library of Congress poet laureates so they will appreciate reading the works of Robert Hass, Billy Collins and Ted Kooser.

We can also take to heart MacLeish's exhortations to librarians regarding censorship. Speaking of another era, the fifties and McCarthyism, MacLeish noted that "[s]ome of the mostly unsung heroes of that period were the librarians, that is, people who refused to put up with the censoring of books on their shelves, who insisted on the right of a free people to read as adults and make up their own minds" (*Reflections* 141). Looking back even further to the period when he was Librarian of Congress, MacLeish recalled that "[w]hat the librarians could do and did do....was simply to stand by their guns and insist that they would not yield to censors of any kind, even the people who paid the taxes which kept their library going, and a lot of them paid for it" (141). MacLeish, library credentials or not, continues to be an influence on librarians, libraries and its culture. If he were among us today librarians could, with certitude, look to MacLeish to argue for the protection of our rights of privacy and to work to ensure that even more Americans are given access to libraries.

As for the new age of technology, MacLeish, in remarks made in 1967 on dedicating a public library in Massachusetts, seemed to portend the challenges ahead for librarians and libraries. In asking the question of “Why are we here? To what end?” MacLeish contends that “[i]t is not ignorance—lack of information—which has shaken our souls: it is knowledge....vast floods of unassimilated, uncomprehended knowledge” (Champion 246). It is this vast access to information that is, in answering the query of what is man, “the one question ‘information’ never answers but can only ask—the one question the electronic library of ‘information’ can only put to its computers—not resolve” (247).

MacLeish then alludes to the new library of the Harvard Medical School where there is one room filled with poetry books and “books of high literature” and none related to science, medicine or technology. He explains to his audience at the dedication that those books are in the room at the medical school library because “they belong there...because the man comes before the information” (247-48). MacLeish concludes his dedication speech explaining that “for the same reason does the general library which continues to concern itself with literature and with works of art and mind belong at the center of the vast new electronic society which exists for science and for progress and for the brave new world” (248).

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Notes on Sources

For this paper I ultimately just used one journal article and disregarded secondary sources about Archibald MacLeish. In dealing with such an articulate writer and scholar, it was difficult to read about him “second hand” when his letters, writing and interviews are so engaging and informative.

Regarding finding the sources, I must note that an excellent reference, *Archibald MacLeish a Selectively Annotated Bibliography* by Helen E. Ellis and Bernard A. Drabeck is available. As for me, I just went to Hamilton and the Hawaii State Library and borrowed most of the books on MacLeish.

His book *Reflections*, however, was particularly illuminating as, in the last years of his life, he commented on all events, small and monumental. *Champion of a Cause* is a collection of essays and addresses on librarianship. *Riders on the Earth* is comprised of essays and articles written in the late sixties and early seventies. *Letters of Archibald MacLeish* is also especially fascinating because letters include those written to Ernest Hemingway, Amy Lowell, Louis Untermeyer, Carl Sandburg, Marianne Moore, McGeorge Bundy and of course, Franklin Roosevelt.

