

The Guardians of the French Language Are Deadlocked, Just Like Their Country

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Balzac tried and failed. Zola knocked on the door dozens of times and was always refused.

Verlaine got no votes. Hugo got in, barely, only after multiple tries. The august *Académie française* — the elite club of 40 “immortals,” as the members are known, that serves as the official guardian of the French language — does not admit just anybody. So exclusive is it that most of France’s greatest writers never made it.

But the sacred job of protecting France from the “deadly snobbery of Anglo-American,” as a member spat out in a speech last month, has rarely been more difficult to attain. Four vacancies — lifelong tenures — have opened since December 2016. Three times the academy members have voted, most recently in late January, and three times they have failed to achieve a majority.

The deadlock, some academy members say, reflects France’s own deadlock — between the proud, timeless France determined to preserve itself at all costs, and the France struggling to adapt to a 21st century defined by globalization, migration and social upheaval, witnessed in the “Yellow Vest” revolt. “We’re the reflection of society, and it’s a society that’s questioning itself,” said Amin Maalouf, the Lebanese-born novelist and a member of the academy.

Then there are those who grumble that, for a conservative institution divided by factions, it is merely business as usual. The academy has been around since 1634, when it was founded by Cardinal Richelieu to promote and protect the French language, and it is not in any hurry. The academy “is an old lady, and very sensitive,” said one of the newer members, the Haitian-born Canadian writer Dany Laferrière.

Actually, it is mostly old white men. There are just five women among the members, and Mr. Laferrière is the only black member. The average age was well over 70 in a recent tally by the French media. Whether the academy is struggling to update or diversify itself, or even wants to, is difficult to know. The deliberations of its members, under the graceful 17th-century dome of the *Institut de France*, are buried in mystery.

But the rejections are humiliatingly public. The former education minister Luc Ferry saw his name in the headlines recently, and not in a good way. The vote on his membership was decisive. Mr. Ferry declined to comment. Aside from renewing itself, the academy’s real business is updating the definitive dictionary of French, which it has been doing since the 17th century. So sacred is the task that the updates are published as an official government document.

On Thursday, the members approved the feminization of professional titles. It was a veritable breakthrough for an academy that has for years resisted the adaptation, which is already practiced widely in France, with or without the sanction of the immortals. Language may change, and society, too, but slowly in the view of the academy.

“The question is, should the academy guard its principles?” Mr. Laferrière said. “We could fill all the seats tomorrow.” That is not likely to happen. The academy chooses you, you do not choose the academy. Nonetheless, no one can become a member without writing a strongly worded letter soliciting a place.

Some French writers never bother, as is rumoured to be the case with some of the country’s best-known contemporary authors. Neither of France’s two living Nobel literature laureates, Patrick Modiano and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, are members. Neither is Michel Houellebecq, reckoned to be among the most penetrating of all contemporary European novelists. Others are encouraged to apply, then lose the vote.

“We are alarmed at not finding académiciens that are to the taste of the academy,” Mr. Laferrière said. But some members reject the argument that no upstanding defender of France’s language and cultural values can be found, and hint at a deeper crisis. The real question, for some, is what the deadlock says about the beleaguered France of today.

Of the inability to move forward, Dominique Bona, a novelist and one of the few women to sit among the immortals, said, “I’m a little bit astonished.” “We’ve had some remarkable candidates, real choices,” Ms. Bona said. “I’m personally disappointed that the academy is giving them the cold shoulder. Is this a French malaise? The bad mood around us, is it communicating itself to the academy?”

To be sure, the ceremonious world of the academy seems a universe away from France’s current Yellow Vest uprising, whose instincts tend more toward revolution than preservation. Last month, the academy members trooped down a wooden staircase of the *Institut de France*, the sharp drumbeats of the Republican Guard echoing through the marbled halls.

They were there to induct the newest member they could agree upon, the novelist Patrick Grainville, an author of baroque fantasies. Former President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, 93, a member of the academy since 2003, negotiated the stairs supported by two aides. The smartly dressed invited public were scattered amid uniformed academy members, in their green embroidered uniforms.

Their custom-made robes cost in the neighborhood of \$50,000, members said, and the swords that are *de rigueur* for members are not cheap, either. Mr. Maalouf said he had to raise nearly \$230,000 for the costs associated with his induction. As with other ceremonious and antiquated French institutions, the pomp provides its own justification. The academy represents France’s consecration of its writers, a nearly unique national status.

Indeed, the unusual nature of the academy’s mission, in a world where much of what it celebrates is under siege, leaves some members pessimistic it can protect even itself. “French society: Will it continue?” asked Jean-Marie Rouart, a critic and novelist who has been a member since 1997. Then he answered his own question. “The bourgeoisie is dying,” Mr. Rouart grumbled. Before, “you would see the academy members at dinner parties. Now there aren’t even dinner parties. It’s finished.”