

“G”

The Literary Club of Cincinnati

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Variations on the letter “G” with gambits into mythology, which I shall now call “grythology” to continue use of the letter “G”. A golden griffin on gossamer wings glided over the glistening Aegean past a grand galleon, grasped the gleaming object, then galloped up Mount Olympus and placed the gift between the alpha and omega. Henceforth, Greek children learned their alpha beta gammas. Alexander the Great, student of Aristotle, spread Hellenic grammar and culture from Gostiver to Garbandi to Girga. By the time of Jesus of Galilee, who was hung on the gibbet of a cross, and whom many accept as the Son of God, Greek was the governing language of much of the Eastern Mediterranean. Saul, the Pharisee, student of Gamiliel, spoke and wrote in Greek and, upon his conversion to Christianity, took the Greek name Paul. He then proceeded to write his gifted epistles in Greek. The gospels of Matthew, Luke, Mark, and John were actually grouped together later.

Before the spread of Christianity, Greece was the home of gods galore and the locus of mythology, which I now call “grythology.” A dictionary check does not list the word, so I shall claim its invention with the belief that expanding the language ought to be a function of a literary club. My definition of grythology is gratuitous gleaning of fact from fiction, garnished with a measure of embellishment.

Some grand Greek gryths were based on gilded legends from the exotic East, Persia, and even the Gangese. British author, Robert Graves, gallantly sought to catalog the gryths in his 1955 gala, *Greek Myths I*, which catalogued more than 150 actors and episodes. Volume I was quite enough for me, and I did not seek additional glories. Graves exhausted the topic and himself and gave up the ghost in Majorca in 1985. He included Zeus, Aphrodite, and Athena, but also lesser known gods and events, such as the castration of Uranus. (I’ll spare you the details). Other names of interest were Pygmalion, Sisyphus, Midas, Daedalus, and Calydon, which found their way into latter day literature and geography.

Of particular interest to me were Ganamedes and Galatea, because their names begin with G. Ganamedes was the son of King Tros, who gave his name to Troy. Ganamedes was a beautiful youth who became wine pourer to the gods. The passionate Eos abducted him to be her

paramour, as she was in the habit of grabbing young males with her charms. I happen to drive an Eos, a Volkswagen hardtop convertible (not a diesel), a gracious gift from Anne for my 80th birthday. (She probably didn't know the reputation of Eos as a glamorous seductress). Aphrodite brought Galatea, a minor character in grythology, to life from an ivory image given to her by Pygmalion – and the glorification goes on and on.

On inventing language: pharmaceutical and electronic companies may lead the way, but some literary giants have coined new words and phrases. Notable authors were William Shakespeare and James Joyce, but the champion was Lewis Carroll in his Jabberwocky, stanza I:

“Twas brillig, and the slivey toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves. And the nome raths outgrabe.”

The letter G actually developed from the northern Semitic “ghimel” and was later adopted by the Greeks as the third letter of their alphabet. The Etruscans, with no distinction in their language between the hard g and k sounds, combined the two. The Romans added a small stroke to c to restore g to a useful life. G shows up in Gothic, Italian, and French and eventually into English as the seventh letter. G has taken on various meanings, including g for gram, a unit of measure, a G note on the musical scale, a thousand dollar bill (never saw one of those), G for guard on a football team, units of gravity (zero g's being weightlessness), and on and on.

Grythology is useful in family genealogy. My maternal grandmother, Rosabelle Girton (with a G), died in 1934, three years after I was born. While I have no graphic recollection of her, I most assuredly met her in the ritual of my mother taking offspring to be viewed by grandparents, though I am not certain whether I passed inspection as her 23rd grandchild. I hope that I didn't gurgle or wet on her in the excitement. Based on early photographs, Rosabelle was a handsome, sturdy, young woman born in the vicinity of Plymouth, Pennsylvania. Were I to employ some grythology, I would relate her to Girton College, named for the town of Girton, England, and which college is now part of Cambridge University. In fact, Rosabelle was born in 1857, twelve years prior to the founding of Girton College, which she would have been proud to know was the first English college for women. Rosabelle's own education was probably limited, and I believe her mother, my great-grandmother, to be generally illiterate, like forebears were on both sides of my family just a few generations back. (We sometimes forget that many transplants to North America came willingly or unwillingly from the lower grades of society, where education was an unaffordable luxury). Rosabelle married Jasper Fritz and proceeded to have

nine children on the family farm near Waller, without the glory of indoor plumbing. The seventh child and first girl was my mother, Anna Rosetta Fritz. They loved lyrical names. The Dutch Fritzes were devout Methodists who did not drink, smoke, dance, or cuss-usually. By some quirk of fate, Anna was attracted to my Irish Catholic father, James Francis Dorsey, a man who was born in a lumber camp in rural Sullivan County, near the town of Lopez (an interesting name for a town full of Irish). Frank, as he was called, spent part of his youth in the family hotel where spirituous beverages were abundant, and who then gloried in his service in the American Expeditionary Force in World War I. Of such is grythology woven. Opposites, Anna and Frank, did indeed attract. Surely tongues galloped in both households. I was the sixth of seven offspring from that gladsome union.

My mother was a great raconteuse and filled our household with stories of genealogy and gala events on the farm, parents and siblings, more stuff of grythology. A favorite gem told a few times was of Rosabelle's early employment with an anthracite mine boss, a gaunt giant. Once while straightening up the boss's getaway, a large, graceless revolver fell to the floor, frightening my grandmother. Upon reporting the incident to the mine boss, she was instructed to leave that gun handy, stating, "I wish to be ready if those damned Molly Maguires show up." There's some real grythology here, as the Mollies were heroes to the downtrodden Irish immigrant miners but gauche and guileful to the rest of society. Some more grythology is that remnants of the gang were hung in my hometown, but I've not gleaned that information for genuineness.

Another familial G is Marion Girard, soft g, daughter-in-law, married to one son and mother of two grandchildren. Molly, as we call her, is the most educated in the family, with degrees from Stanford, Harvard, and Yale. She is a glowing author and professor. I can't help but thinking of the changes in the extended family from Rosabelle Girton to Marion Girard, changes of global and gargantuan proportions indeed (think Henry Ford and Google). A very prominent family G is my dear late wife, Anne Grieme, who, despite a gracious career as educator and author, quoted in *Time Magazine*, earner of significant royalties, Enquirer Woman of the Year, mother and grandmother, and on and on, was happy to be known simply as Anne G. Dorsey. This silver goblet in our family collection has a stylized G, which could stand for Grieme, but, in fact, is for Gleason, Anne's mother's family name. Walter Gleason was a New Orleans lawyer and judge who argued and won a case before the United States Supreme Court in 1915, when Oliver Wendell Holmes was Associate Justice. (Thanks to Joe Dehner for researching this).

Two giant enduring myths are the Grail and Gallant Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Grail, from the French “gradale”, means “a hollowed out dish,” and now is almost always associated with the Holy Grail, sometimes graced as “sangraal” or “sangreal”. It has glided into a term to denote the epitome of value or accomplishment, such as the Super Bowl is the Holy Grail of the football season- ugh. There is, in the Banks District of Cincinnati, a popular bar called the Holy Grail. I visited that grandiose but graceless bar to research this paper and found that few knew the origins of the legend. Finally, a waitress checked and reported that the four owners are big fans of Harrison Ford and the Indiana Jones movies. (More on this later). In fact, there are several glossy renditions of the Grail in lore, entertainment, and literature, with at least one suggesting that the origins are ancient Celtic, with spears, swords, and chalices, and that the story was adapted for Christian purposes, just as Christmas was linked to pagan Saturnalia festivals.

Most stories link Joseph of Arimathea to the Grail. In fact, Joseph is mentioned in the Gospel of John as the man who sought the body of Jesus from Pilate and, along with Nicodemus, prepared the gaunt body for burial in the Jewish tradition, with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes. There is no mention of a cup or chalice. In two trips to Israel, I’ve not encountered Arimathea, but one Biblical map locates it eight miles north of Jerusalem, so it is currently in Arab Palestine and may have been renamed Ram Allah, though I’m not sure. Medieval interest in the Grail came about when French romantic author, Chretien de Troyes, in 1182, and German author, Wolfram von Eschenbach, in 1200, both created epic works that featured the Crusades, the Knights Templar, the development of Gothic architecture, and the legend of the Holy Grail. The facts of this mythology are that crusaders occupied the Holy Land for 88 years, from 1099 to 1187, until Saladin recaptured the area for the Saracens. The Knights Templar derived their title from their protection of the remains of the Temple of Solomon. Emma Jung, wife of the eminent Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, wrote in the early 20th century that, as Europeans returned from the Holy Land in the 12th century, they brought a renewed thirst for understanding what happened in the time of Jesus. The combination of fact, legend, and embellishment created the story of the Grail as having been the vessel that Jesus used when creating the Eucharist at the Last Supper. The Eucharist, now shared in some form by the more than 40 Christian sects, with many different interpretations of transubstantiation, is linked by legend to the Grail. Somehow, Joseph of Arimathea received the cup from the Last Supper and used it to catch Jesus’ blood when the Roman soldier, Longinus, pierced his side. Joseph, although a member of the

Sanhedrin, was a secret follower of Jesus. One variation of the story is that, in the chaos following the crucifixion, Joseph was imprisoned. It was here where Jesus appeared to Joseph and gave him the Grail, into which a dove daily placed communion wafers upon which Joseph survived until his eventual release in 70 AD, the year that the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Ironically, construction on the Coliseum in Rome began the next year.

It should now be evident that there are many versions of the Grail legend. We next find Joseph in Europe, where he encounters the Fisher King, Brons. The Fisher King is linked to Percival, an aspiring knight who seeks the Holy Grail and arrives at the castle of the ailing Fisher King. If Percival asks the proper ritual question regarding the power of the Grail, the Fisher King will be healed of his ailments. But, failing to do so causes the king to remain ill, and Percival is destined to wander alone for seven years, until instructed by Merlin, Arthur's sorcerer, to return to the Fisher King's castle, ask the ritual question about the Grail, heal the king, and thus become keeper of the Grail. All of this tests the imagination of the reader. If Joseph of Arimethea was released from prison in 70 AD, he would be quite senior when arriving in Europe, and Merlin came along 500 years later. Such is grythology of the Grail.

If this sounds like the stuff of Hollywood fantasy, the Fisher King was indeed the title of a 1991 movie starring the late Robin Williams and Jeff Bridges. While the film is not particularly memorable, it does provide an outlet for Williams' range of glee and grasp for redemption. Four scenes stand out. While Robin is on a quest of a mysterious young woman, the throng of people in Grand Central Station spontaneously breaks into a glamorous grand waltz. Later, Williams and Bridges are lying naked at night in Central Park, gazing at celestial formations, and Williams explains his interpretation of the Fisher King and his link to the Holy Grail, which Williams, in an advanced stage of derangement, believes is residing in a rich recluse's Manhattan mansion. After a gruesome mugging attack, Williams lies in a coma in a gross mental ward in a New York hospital, and Bridges grasps the holy vessel in a daring burglary and brings the cup to Williams, who is then miraculously cured and reunited with the woman from the waltz scene. He is then shown leading his fellow patients in a rendition of, "I like New York in June, how about you?" (By Lane and Freed). While it is a bit of frivolity, it is faithful to the many legends of the Grail in having the power to cure and spiritually enrich. But, in fact, the chalice in the movie is simply a trophy that the rich man had won years earlier. This is also grythology, that the cup is seen in many forms by seekers, from beautiful, virtuous women to floating relics in the air, to sacred

stones. The Grail always has healing or nourishing powers and is always elusive. No one is quite able to retain it. The Fisher King film came 16 years after *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which I won't review here. It is a graceless but giddy gobbledygook of a film.

In any case, Joseph of Arimathea or one of his associates (it is all quite apocryphal) arrives in Glastonbury, with a G, in Britain, and establishes a Christian community that provides safekeeping for what they believe to be the Grail. A series of miracles ensues, and Glastonbury gains fame as a religious site. Fast-forward five centuries, and we find, Arthur, son of Pendragon, established in Camelot, south of Glastonbury. Like the Grail story, the Arthurian legend was amplified by Sir Thomas Mallory's *Mort d'Arthur*, written in Newgate Jail in 1470 and then edited and published by William Caxton. This remarkable piece of storytelling gave us Camelot, Arthur, and knights such as Lancelot, Gareth, Gawain, and Galahad, son of Lancelot. Lancelot sought to find the Grail but was unsuccessful because of his glamorous, adulterous affair with Arthur's queen, Guinevere. Galahad was successful, because his heart was pure. Galahad's grail, as depicted in Christian Hibbert's book, *The Search for King Arthur*, was gold and studded with precious jewels. The chalice would bring long life and well-being to any who possessed it. However, the Grail escaped Galahad's grasp and vanished into heaven. His life continued as a nonstop quest for the Holy Grail. This is the enduring mythology that life is a quest for the glory of the Grail and the benefits it can provide, from long life to riches, to the honor of grasping the chalice Jesus used in establishing the Eucharist.

Alfred Lord Tennyson borrowed from *Mort d'Arthur* and wrote *Idylls of the King*, in which he created an allegory about Camelot being symbolic of the British Empire. The real Arthur battled the Saxons who invaded his homeland. By Tennyson's time, the Saxons were fully integrated with the Britons, Angles, Picts, Jutes, Celts, and Normans to create the English nation, which like a much larger Camelot, was striving to control much of the world. The Grail legend influenced T.S. Eliot's "Wasteland" and, much earlier, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and his quest for something not fully understood. That, of course, is the enduring story; we are all on a quest for something; something beyond our understanding. Like Mallory's *Mort d'Arthur*, *Don Quixote* was written in prison, in Spain.

Richard Wagner engaged the Grail story at least twice, in *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*, the latter based largely on Wolfram von Eschenbach's poem, "Parsifal." *Parsifal* was Wagner's last opera and his most spiritual, and of which he was so possessive that he dictated that it never be

performed any place except for the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth. In fact, it was performed in New York in 1903, twenty years after Wagner's death, and has been performed variously since. It involves the knights of the Holy Grail at Monsalvat, a sanctuary in the Pyrenees. It is a sometimes eerie tale about quest and redemption. A mysterious youth and the lance of Longinus make an appearance. Parsifal, in the climax, raises the chalice in the gesture of consecration. Parsifal is the father of Lohengrin.

The notion of quest and Quixote allows Literary Club memories. A much-loved member was Robert Norrish. His paper, "Unfinished Business - Dear Mom," expressed what all of us have felt after losing a close loved one – things that we wish to have had said or done when he or she was alive. The paper was subsequently published in the Cincinnati Post. His last paper, "Woolgathering," was about his quest to come to grips with retirement and cancer, which later claimed him at much too young an age. In the paper he quoted from *Man of La Mancha*, the Broadway musical based on Cervantes' Don Quixote, with lyrics by Joe Darion:

"To Dream the Impossible Dream, to love pure and chaste from afar,
to bear with unbearable sorrow, to run where the brave do not go."

I was so impressed with the thoughts in the paper that I bought a tape cassette of *Man of La Mancha* and gave it to Bob. He reported that he drove around playing "The Impossible Dream," with tears rolling down his cheeks, listening to Richard Kiley's rich, clear voice – the Impossible Dream. Months thereafter, Bob was gone. In his discussion of Don Quixote, he described Dr. Carrasco, in a black hat, attempting to dissuade the Don from his quest. The black hat says that there are no knights, no chivalry, no enchantment; these are the facts. Don, in turn, replies, "Facts are the enemy of truth." In the book, Quixote asks, "Are the quests for the Holy Grail all lies?" The question is universal, as is Don Quixote. His gaunt statue is prominent on the Rampla in Havana.

Dan Brown, in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests that the Grail is in southern Scotland, in a crypt beneath Rosslyn Chapel. The grail is not found; it always proves to be quite elusive. He also posits in his popular work of fiction that Leonardo da Vinci was a grand master in a secret society, the Priory of Scion, and that his painting of the Last Supper has a number of "codes" about early Christianity, including that the figure of John in the painting is really Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus married and with whom he has a son – and that this is one of the secrets that the Church wishes to suppress. Good mythology, lots of fiction and embellishment.

The Last Supper has been the subject of several paintings, which portray the epic scene and its participants in different lights. I saw Da Vinci's *Last Supper* in the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, but I was not thinking about the Holy Grail at the time, but rather was impressed at the ongoing work of restoration on the masterpiece. Recently, when studying a photographic reduction of the painting, I could not find any object that resembled a chalice. One explanation is that supper is over and some of the utensils are already removed when Jesus announces that one at the table will betray him.

So where is the glorious Grail? East of Loveland, Ohio is a place called Grailville. It is part of a global network of gentlewomen dedicated to grand values of peace and renewal. Sadly, their numbers are dwindling under the pressures of a secular world. The symbol of the community is a chalice holding the globe. On the grounds is a unicursal labyrinth of the same pattern as the one found at the Palace of Knossos in ancient Crete. It is intended for meditation as one gradually progresses to the center.

I experienced the labyrinth on a clear, bright winter's day. Skeletal trees bore early buds. Two turkey buzzards sought their grizzly prey. A jet traced a vapor trail in the sky. I wondered where people were going and whether they were on a quest. The sun, low in the sky, assured the pending vernal equinox. The labyrinth is simply a pattern in the grass, more gray than green. Though there are no birches, I thought of Robert Frost's poem about getting away from the earth for a while, but, in fact, it is nearly impossible to get away from our increasingly secular world. None of us is in Galahad, and we must pursue our own quests on our own terms. I did not find the Holy Grail at Grailville.

All of this brings me to one more "G", Rabbi Nelson Glueck, once President of Hebrew Union College, archeologist, and, to the best of my knowledge, the only Literarian to ever grace the cover of *Time* magazine in 1963 for his epic findings during digs in Transjordan and the Negev in southern Israel. The cover story is the search for man's past, indeed an epic quest. Nelson was born in Cincinnati in 1900 and was ordained a Reform rabbi in 1923. Subsequently, he received a Ph.D. at Jena, Germany, for his dissertation on the Biblical concept of divine kindness. Nelson became a Club member in 1941. During World War II, Rabbi Glueck served with the American Office of Strategic Services, as did another Literarian, Walter Langsam, future president of the University of Cincinnati. In the OSS, Nelson mapped allied escape routes through the desert, which fortunately were not needed after El Alemain. I never met Nelson, but

on two occasions met his widow, Helen Glueck, herself a medical doctor and researcher. Once, in her home in Clifton, as I admired a wall overflowing with ancient pottery, she handed me an item from the first century BC. I pictured myself dropping the pot and its breaking into a hundred pieces, so I quickly gave it back. Among the many grave items that Rabbi Glueck excavated are this chalice and cup, given to the Club in about 1950.

If you happened to see the 1989 movie starring Harrison Ford, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the inspiration for the Holy Grail bar, Jones finds the holy cup far behind the facade of the treasury in Petra. He chooses, from amongst the dozens of shiny chalices, a pottery goblet with the statement, "This looks like the cup of a carpenter." And, when the grail is in his grasp, he loses it as an earthquake destroys the temple. It is a swashbuckling yarn, but it shows the elusiveness of the Grail.

I have a better yarn. The pottery cup came to Jesus as a gift from his earthly father, Joseph of the House of David, who bought it from itinerant Bedouin traders, who had picked up various items exposed in the windblown Negev and peddled them around Palestine. Though it was obviously already old, in the poor region of Galilee, nothing of value was discarded. Jesus treasured the chalice from Joseph and kept it with him through his ministry, culminating in the Last Supper and Crucifixion. The vessel helped to establish the Eucharist. After Jesus' crucifixion, Joseph of Arimethea salvaged the chalice, rarely traveled far from Jerusalem, and kept the godly goblet until he died. His heirs, not knowing the grand story and wishing to reduce the accumulations of the deceased, sold the chalice to some other Bedouin traders, who, while on their way to Egypt, inadvertently lost it in the Negev, where centuries of storms covered it many times over. In the 20th century, Rabbi Glueck, on an archeological expedition, found the chalice along with other artifacts and, eventually, not knowing the true story of the Grail, gave it to the Literary Club, where it has resided for over half a century. So, gentlemen of the Club, I present to you the long-lost Holy Grail. May it continue to reside here for many more centuries.

Apocryphal, probably, but indeed, where is the Holy Grail? Many have sought the Grail in literature, film, legend, and grythology, but no one has ever retained it. Rabbi Glueck, being of a scientific bent, probably gave little mind to the Grail story, but maybe, just maybe, he knew the story well and planted the Grail here in hopes that some day a Club member would solve the riddle. So, here's to you, Rabbi Glueck, for the gift that helped us to grasp and solve the great mystery of the Holy Grail.