

It is a significant honor to be the President of our Literary Club for 2020-21. Thank you. I wish we could have dined together in person before this Anniversary Program, but we have tried to share a meal; I appreciate your collaboration.

Three Questions

"T'is is an ill favored thing, but mine own."

Touchstone, *As You Like it*, Act 5, scene 4

The mid-nineteenth century gave birth to a remarkable literary event and also to an artist who will involve and disturb us this evening. Two of our most illustrious members, great artists whose images yet hang on the walls of the Literary Club, Henri Farny (1847-1916) and Frank Duveneck, (1848-1919), were born at this time, 1847 and 1848 respectively. The Literary Club, just a year younger, was officially founded 171 years ago, on October 29, 1849. The last Monday of October has become our Annual Celebration of this important event in the cultural history of our city, marked by a grand dinner, alas not this year, together.

A third artist of some note was also born at this time, in 1848, Duveneck's natal year. Like Farny he was French by birth, Eugene-Henri-Paul Gauguin. (1848-1903). One of the greatest of Gauguin's quasi-religious, symbolist paintings, with eroticized and exoticized views of Polynesia, completed in 1897, holds a place of honor in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Its mysterious title contains three questions:

D'ou Venons Nous. **(Where do we come from?)**

Que Sommes Nous. **(What are we?)**

Ou Allons Nous. **(Where are we going?)**

The twelve Tahitians on this canvas, and their creator, demand: "**Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?**" Gauguin called the work, "not a title but a signature..."

These three questions, which the artist actually painted on his canvas as his title, are haunting. They are universals, concerns with which we all must struggle. We must answer them also as members of the Literary Club.

*D'ou venons-nous? **Where do we come from?***

A hand written note on the first page of the first volume of the Club Minutes in our Library announced our arrival on the Cincinnati literary scene. Twelve young men came together on October 29, 1849 as a "Society" to consider and adopt a constitution and set of by-laws. These had been drafted by a committee previously appointed at a preliminary meeting. But when? The date of the first deliberations by the group to formalize itself is unknown. Is the last Monday in October then really the date of the founding of the Literary Club? Well, legally, yes! On this date the members agreed to weekly debates of questions of contemporary importance at future meetings, and handwritten notes of the topic and arguments on both sides can be found in the Library volumes labeled "Minutes." Preparation for these debates was time consuming; eventually these preparatory notes became the first formal papers in the Club around 1862. All the titles, dates and authors, except those of pre-Civil War essays and debates, have been indexed in our anniversary albums, beginning in 1924, with the celebration of our seventy-fifth anniversary.

However, there is no index to reveal the actual content, the subjects of the papers. By not knowing what each member actually wrote about, we have virtually lost access to decades of the writings of our illustrious predecessors. Furthermore, we the members have, oh so cleverly, created a challenging problem: what exactly did each member write about? This is a significant

dilemma with no easy solution in sight! Have you looked at the titles on the card that our dedicated and hard-working clerk, Tom Cuni, has mailed us for the November papers. Here's a preview: "The Complete French Dinner," "#15," "Seeking the Sphere to Connect Them," and "Mediocrity Averted." Thus, among this Club's many remarkable accomplishments has been the elevation of the fine art of title obfuscation to brilliant new heights, essentially over our entire literary history. Have you not done the same? The very way we have chosen to list the titles of our presentations, perhaps as a test of our sense of humor, or knowledge of obscure factoids, could also whet the appetites of our potential audience to attend a Club meeting to learn what in heaven's name a mysteriously, or even bizarrely, titled paper was actually about? Blessed with a website holding almost all of our papers (*missing inexplicably: September, 1967 to June, 1970 and September, 1971 to June, 1979*), we can still read them all, and recover their chosen topics, their opinions, their erudition. Here is our opportunity to examine an issue, event, or personality as perceived from the view of past decades, or even well over a century ago. We can obtain valuable perspective concerning our own approach to the topic; connect with a Club member who had been previously been unknown, or recognized only by a name or a portrait on our walls. The potential is enormous. Who knows what topics exist in our Literary Club papers, leather-bound or electronically reproduced? Will they, and we too, "pass and be forgotten with the rest?" In 1999, the late Rollin Workman wrote for our Sesquicentennial Celebration, his poem "The Triple Torches," soon to be mounted in our Library. This quatrain is haunting :

"How many papers have been read

Inside these muse touched walls?

How many words of men now dead,

Which no man now recalls."

There is an uncomfortable irony to the idea that we, the current Club members, who deeply honor our past, will *lose that literary past* if we do not index our historic papers. Consider what treasures sit on our mantels and hang from our walls. it is time for our Members to rediscover

our lost past *literary* history as well and learn from the genius of our forebears. Thousands of papers, beautifully bound in regal red leather, sit on our Library shelves, eagerly awaiting their reunion with us.

Is this really possible or must it remain merely wishful thinking? There are ways to accomplish this intellectual time travel. If each of us, over a couple of years, "adopted" a year of our papers, each skimming forty papers, one a week, over a nine month Club "season" to note the topic or topics of the paper. When alphabetized we would have an index through which the papers could be accessed, also aiding your search for what has previously been written here on topics close to that you are planning to investigate, or for the sheer fun of learning what was written about the subject. We now have a Club Publication Committee who might lead the charge. It would be worth the effort, believe me. Try reading what Alphonso Taft, that President's father, thought, in 1890, about the décolletage on display at the Court of the Austro-Hungarian emperor, and so many more delightful papers? *D'ou venons nous?* Where do we come from? *Our past awaits recognition from our present.*

Que sommes nous? **What are we?** We are not opposed to change while taking pride in our remarkable 171 year old history, embroidered with very special traditions. Where else in the United States is the clerk of an organization still known as the "*clark.*" When introduced to the distinguished and brilliant Very Reverend Herbert Thompson, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio, he shook my hand while I stammered out what an "honor it was to meet you Bishop Thompson." He looked me straight in the eye, and, with a failed attempt at a serious reply, chuckled, "Around here they call me Herb...even the Episcopalians!" This is the Literary Club atmosphere.

A past president once called us a group of "men of attainment, sympathetic to the arts and scholarship, and not bored by serious discussion." Slowly and subtly change has indeed crept into our hallowed halls over many years. At first we were a debating society, arguing each side of nineteenth century events, such as "Should the Fugitive Slave Law be abolished?" Hopefully

tongue in cheek, we find a debate entitled "Is there adequate evidence to believe in the existence of the Devil"? We don't know which side won that one! Before too many decades of the nineteenth century had passed, this approach morphed into having each member, in his turn, produce a formal presentation or paper, but always headed by that traditional odd or deceptive title.

We have changed the location of the Club over twelve times and have been in our 1820 Club House for a mere ninety years. We started with twelve members and now are limited to one hundred. We even stopped smoking in the Club House! The typewriter, invented in 1868, was successfully commercialized by Remington in 1873. By the time Mark Twain visited the Club, January 3, 1885, past president Gordon Christenson noted that "the Club was recording its essays in script and he was using the typewriter." Prolific member Charles Wilby wrote the first typed paper for the Club, recorded in Volume 11, 1892. In 1988 It took the Board of Management a full year to agree on replacing an obsolete rotary phone (remember those?) in the library with a digital one.

Our 1974 contract with the Cincinnati Historical Society seems to have been our first *bona fide* outreach effort. This stipulates that a "qualified scholar" may have access at once to our volumes, but the general public must wait five years for access. We still extend to them one bound copy a year. The World Wide Web arrived in 1989. A motion by the late Bill Friedlander to examine the possibility of a Club website occurred in 2007. Mercifully, Jim Myers and Eugene Rutz brought ours to life and Eugene has carefully, wisely, and generously nurtured it since.

Within the last five years the members have voted, by a margin of three to one that, except for our traditional Monday evenings together, women will be welcomed at special Literary Club events, tours, and lectures. A long tradition of informality between members is a very special one, and there is no room for putting on airs here. We quickly learn that whatever we write about, the audience will contain someone who knows more about the topic than the author. And recall my the first encounter with Bishop Thompson---my friend Herb! What glorious traditions, all important parts of "*Que sommes nous*", who we are!

Ou allons nous, where are we going? Gentlemen, we don't know yet, of course, but there are a few ideas floating about. Polk Laffoon's recent article in *Cincinnati Magazine* is a superb evocation of the Literary Club and its historical (e.g., the 1820 Club House, deep literary roots), emotional (the friendships we form), and intellectual aspects which draw each of us downtown weekly for nine months each year. Here we join not only old friends and acquaintances but also extraordinary new members, who are warmly welcomed. When we return to the Club House we will be fulfilling a promise, which should have happened last spring. On any evening but Monday, programs and lectures, with women as lecturers and as guests in the audience, will include member Jack Davis and his wife, Sharon Stocker, providing a long-awaited lecture on their profoundly important excavations on the Greek island of Pylos. Dick Hague, our newly elected Vice President and highly honored poet, has agreed to invite several colleagues to join him in an evening of poetry at the Club. Joe Dehner has offered to sponsor a series of seminars in the Club House by professional writers and educators, to assist us in improving our writing skills. Women *will* be involved in all these activities.

Where else are we going? There is a vital and profoundly important discussion which this Club must, in my view, have. We must examine, for our future membership, our attitudes and history for diversity, equity, and inclusion. These are not merely slogans; they are a call to action. There is no question in my mind that we *will* welcome creative candidates for Club membership who demonstrate their ability to write well, regardless of, in the words we have heard all our lives, "race, creed, or color." I strongly condemn any attempt to require membership quotas in this Club! The Club must never act as if it has a quota to fill for any group. However, let us continue to bring to our Monday evening gatherings as guests not only wise and able old friends, but also wise and able new colleagues, acquaintances and friends. Such men, bringing to the Literary Club a wide variety of backgrounds, talents, and professions, will hopefully be eager to join us in learning, expressing what is important to each individual, and enjoying each other's writing, insights, and laughter.

So, do we have yet an idea of "*Ou allons nous*," **where are we going?** Where might we adventure forward? There a few additional ideas of areas which have been suggested for

examination. I believe that our Club, justifiably rejoicing in so many aspects of its past, might benefit from serious discussions about the extent to which we wish to change. I feel that we will be stronger and wiser from greater heterogeneity in our membership. Also challenging, potentially controversial choices lie before us as to whether we wish to be a greater intellectual force in our community. Are there unexplored niches for the Club, unmet communal literary needs? Some Club members have suggested a separate website, electively joined, for members who wish to make their weekly papers available to the public. What about an annual publication of the Best of the Literary Club? Also, the members of our own Writers' Circles and other intellectual gatherings of Club members should take place within our walls, not elsewhere.

*Ou allons nous? **Where are we going?*** We, the members, who love what the Club stands for, must decide the degree to which we change. The membership of the Literary Club is a remarkable one, comprised of men who are not only among the best and the brightest, but who also, with only, perhaps a mini-qualm, and a significant degree of courage, weekly share our views of the world and its occupants, past, present, future, and imaginary. These are challenging, yet exciting, times as our Literary Club, celebrating its 171st year together (alas physically apart because of the coronavirus), continues to evolve, cautiously but wisely, as it always has, toward even higher degrees of achievement, coupled with excellence.

And that, M. Gauguin should answer your questions!

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