

Poet, Ploughman, Statesman, Derelict

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President's Address, Anniversary Observance, Oct. 25, 2021

More than fifty years ago, in school year 1968-69, I served as President, or as we termed it, Host, of the literary fraternity Mu Mu Nu at Xavier University. Founded in the 1930s by the Jesuit priest Paul J. Sweeney, the group was known as Mermaid Tavern, after the London establishment purportedly frequented by Shakespeare and a rabble of other Elizabethan writers. Even two hundred years later, its reputation then grown to legend, it was celebrated by John Keats in his "Lines on The Mermaid Tavern." "Souls of poets dead and gone,/ what Elysium have ye known,/ happy field or mossy cavern,/ choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?"

I have not communicated with my deceased Mermaid Tavern brethren, so I cannot answer Keats's question. Our fellow Literarian and former Mermaid Taverner, Bill Sena, has not visited Elysium either. So I can only offer earth-bound testimony about the two all-male writing groups I have belonged to in my life, and perhaps offer some comparisons, some contrasts, some anecdotes, and some conclusions, though more likely I am to find myself—as our Club, still alive and well after nearly two centuries of existence—*in medias res*.

Like ours, prospective members were invited by current members. During initiation week we had to march around the campus reciting the entirety of Keats's poem to anyone within earshot. Perhaps most trying was having to do this before chuckling football players during their sequestered huge suppers in a separate room off the school dining hall. To them, we were a kind of geeky, hirsute sideshow, but most of them knew enough to understand that Mermaid Tavern was an old Musketeer team, worthy of some sort of crooked respect. And after all, I had gone to school with at least a couple of them—Danny Abramowicz and Kenny Zuk, so there was a kind of grudging acceptance given to this outfit with a Steubenville boy in it.

In addition to Keats's ballad, we were required to memorize an entire lexicon of Elizabethan lingo—*orts voider, butterie, cates and dainties*—on which we would regularly be quizzed by our sponsors until we got them all right. For the curious, here are

the translations: orts voider—ashtray or garbage can; butterie—supplies of drinkables and comestibles for the meeting; cates and dainties—butterie supplies, originally sweetstuffs, I imagine, but in our time, the familiar chips and nuts and pretzels.

Having survived the public recitations, campus-wide humiliations, and vocabulary quizzes, we would brace for induction night. For a couple of hours before the eight o'clock meeting, we endured hazings that verged on the terrifying and criminal—a common ordeal was to ply questants with Hudepohl or Schoenling's absolute bottom of the line Top Hat beer, pull a pillow case over their spinning heads, and lead them out onto Victory Parkway. There would then be staged an accident in which one of the initiates was struck by a car. (Several Taverners were veterans of the theater program, so this scene was often unsettlingly real.)

Enduring all this travail culminated in the ceremony, a *hugger-mugger* (to use another hijacked Elizabethan term meaning “secret”) a hugger-mugger affair of dim lights, candles, obscure ritual, and drinking in the Tavern's rooms. The faculty advisor—in Mermaid Tavern parlance, “The Warder”—was Dr. Karl P. Wentersdorf, alias Will Davenant, his patronymic coming from the playwright and Poet Laureate who was allegedly Shakespeare's godson. More daring conspiracy theories claimed him to be Shakespeare's actual offspring.

Warder Will, himself no creative writer but a keen critic and a world-renowned Shakespeare and Chaucer scholar, offered hundreds of undergraduate and graduate writers friendship and support for decades before his retirement. All members of Mermaid Tavern were given their Shakespeare-era patronymic by Warder Will. They included the drama team of Fletcher and Beaumont, John Donne, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and Thomas Heywood, my patronymic, after a minor Elizabethan playwright, author of among other comedic dramas, “A Woman Killed With Kindness.”

The initiation rituals ended with each new member being presented a hand-decorated document with the Mermaid impress. This was the Mermaid Tavern equivalent of the Literary Club's signing of the Constitution.

I report all this in the 173rd year of our Literary Club. And as you will see, the similarities are striking. Is there a future paper exploring the odd similarities of housing,

literary agendas, meeting times, refreshments, and other local particularities of mens' literary clubs wherever and whenever they might be found?

Like ours, Mermaid Tavern was a long-standing all-male organization. Like ours, it cultivated a sense of camaraderie, though at the same time it could be much more openly competitive and critical than ours. Like our Literary Club, Mermaid Tavern claimed its own meeting rooms, in a North Avondale mansion basement rathskeller with a fireplace, tile floor, leaded windows, cushioned long settles, a small bar, and its own private entrance from the street. Like ours, the quarters featured a large carved chair, opposite the fireplace, next to which a brass floor lamp stood, providing the reader with light enough to make out his faint typescript or crumpled scribbling. Like ours, Mermaid Tavern met on every Monday night throughout the two school terms. Unlike the Literary Club, however, each of the weekly meetings—usually featuring poetry—was interrupted by the most vigorous, and sometimes vicious, criticism. There were no creative writing classes in the university curriculum at that time so the only commentary and response to our writing was by our peers, and unlike here at the Literary Club criticism came vigorously, fully, and immediately. It was the time of the Vietnam War, and several members were ROTC students (it was required of all freshmen and sophomores at XU in those days, and once in a while a guy coming late from a class on shooting azimuths, still dressed in his uniform, would read some anti-war poem he'd crafted.) Whether the fact that it was the war time vibe that accounted for the energy of the responses, or whether it was the counter-cultural atmosphere of protest in the rising Sixties, I'm not sure. But whatever the subject, our efforts were intense, risky, and occasionally, sophomoric or obscene, or both. The most infamous case was by a Taverner named John Blanchard, whose fabliau—a medieval form best exemplified by Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*—and which often featured anti-clerical satire and gross sexual content, appeared in the school literary magazine *Athenaeum*. Entitled "The Clerical Abuses of Putnam County, Kentucky," it featured, among other outrageousness, an orgiastic church organ player and a nearby life-sized statue of St. John Baptist, open-mouthed and proclaiming the good news. I decline to go any further with its plot, so as not to resurrect the trouble it caused. But the ensuing kerfuffle between ashen-faced administrators on the one side, and mildly

amused professors, including Dr. Wentersdorf and Fr. Thomas Savage, S.J., Chair of the English Dept. on the other, was by far the most entertaining and extended of my four years at Xavier. Warder Will continued his defense of the fabliau for months afterwards, occasioning Xavier President Paul O'Connor, S.J, to retire from the fray. "Karl," he wrote, "thanks for your latest communication (Letter #6) on the *Athenaeum* story. I must admit that I have thoroughly enjoyed reading all your communications and received a great deal of enlightenment....However, I must warn you that at the end of Letter #10 I will expect to receive an examination of their contents, and if passed successfully, I will demand three graduate credit hours for a course we will call "The Fabliau Genre."

The tone of this letter sounds much like we might hear in our own Literary Club—wit, humor, humility, tolerance, a bit of smiling irony.

But the much more adolescent critical remarks following Mermaid Tavern readings soon built up a useful scar tissue over our writing psyches. It was brutal, exhilarating, empowering. Despite—or I suspect *because* of this intellectual sluggery, which toughened us and sharpened our writing and revising skills, many former Taverners survived and went on to literary careers of one kind or another, whether in poetry, fiction, or other genres. One, Jay Moriarty, a Taverner who graduated Xavier the year before I became Host, wrote for seven years for Norman Lear's "All in the Family," including the infamous Christmas show in which Archie Bunker's pal who has lost a son in Vietnam and Meathead's friend Dave who fled to Canada to avoid the draft show up together at the Bunker's dinner table. You can imagine the weight of that encounter. According to Moriarty in a later interview, The Writers Guild of America called "The Draft Dodger" "one of the top 100 shows ever seen on television."

Other Tavern cohorts have published dozens of volumes of poetry, fiction, prose poetry and other forms. One of those was Robert J. Collins, founder and editor of the *Birmingham Poetry Review* out of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. It has been publishing nationally-known writers since 1987. Another. Robert J. Miltner, taught creative writing at Kent State for decades. A third, Joseph Enzweiler, homesteaded in Alaska, where he published half a dozen books of fine poems while practicing several skills and trades sometimes simultaneously: carpenter, figure skater, cartographer, geophysicist. During our undergraduate days, with no formal creative writing classes, we

sharpened our skills, and survived the Vietnam era huddled in bunkers of words. And finally, the arrival of change loomed over Mermaid Tavern's decades-old traditions. It became acute when, in the year of my service as Host, the university went coed.

Unlike in our Club, there was a shallow undercurrent of misogyny on campus at the time. The *XU News* featured a cartoonist, another English major, never a Taverner, who named his strip and its title character, "Hostile Sloth." As you might infer, this cad represented the exact opposite of what kind of man the Jesuits labored to form. When, years ago, I first read *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy O'Toole, I swore it must have been based on Hostile Sloth. Before the school went co-ed, the Evening College accepted women students, and they could be seen, conspicuously, in a few day classes, One, a female English major named Carmine Bell, was transmogrified into "Carbine Bull" by Hostile Sloth, and she appeared in various chauvinistic scenarios. Not a few male students failed to see themselves in the satire, and laughed.

It was decided that Mermaid Tavern would admit women in the upcoming school year, 1970. Incidentally, that was my first experience with an all-male institution going co-ed; my second occurred in my 12th year of teaching, when the all-Male Purcell High School became Purcell Marian, after merging with its sister school down Madison Road in 1981. There were boys in the class of 1980 who still resent the fact that they missed "the girls" and harbor ill-defined grudges against whatever powers oversaw this transition. I'm not sure that it wasn't one of the best things ever to happen to the school. It so happened that one of the first coeds admitted to Mermaid Tavern was the girlfriend (later wife) of my fellow Taverner and soon-to-be fellow English teacher at Purcell, Jim Quinlivan. Rae-Jeanne Carr, in the sometimes mischievous assigning of names by Warder Will, was given the matronymic Katherine Parr, making her Katherine Parr Carr, named after the last wife of Henry VIII, and tutor to Queen Elizabeth. Katherine Parr was a woman perhaps more acutely intelligent and educated than any of the men whose names we males were given, despite her dubious judgment in marrying Henry VIII.

Thus the narrative of my two male literary clubs diverges. What is in our future? I will not venture a conclusion, despite some changes that might be implicit in my

remarks so far. Aside from hope and speculation, here are some plans I have for the immediate future.

Last year, Ted Silberstein proposed that we index all the past papers. It would be of great value to accomplish this by assembling some volunteers to do a careful reading of recent and then older papers, indexing them under their general theme or subject, as well as classifying each by genre: history, memoir, nonfiction, poetry, personal essay, for example. I want to move Ted's proposal forward.

Joe Dehner's suggestions a couple of Presidential terms ago are already being enacted: the formation of a Publications Committee and production of an annual collection of Literarian's writings. The Publications committee is embarked on this year's book, *What It Cost*, as we speak. Additionally, the integration of Writer's Circles into the Club's environs is imminent. In the case of the limited use of our building—on which each member pays roughly \$150 a year to cover our tax bill—only one day's occupation per week for two thirds of the year seems considerable under-usage. The Writers Series and the Poets Laureate Series are also ready to launch, utilizing the Club in educational and community-service ways to the citizens of Cincinnati.

The new bookcase which will soon arrive in the Reception Room, funded by Literarians, friends and the wife of the late Doug Maundrell, should house the most recent books by members, (say, those published in the last 20 years or so.) And I propose two more record-keeping chores: the resumption, at the beginning of each meeting, of the announcement of all members' publications, whether literary or professional, in any form: book, journal article, online journal or report, podcast. We should be aware of each other's accomplishments. Finally, and a probably daunting task, but one which should be done for historical reasons: the full bibliography of Literary Club members from its beginning. Just think of how many papers, articles, perhaps even books, might be mined from such a resource. *The Literary Club on War, 1849-the Present. Gilded Age Humor in the Writings of the Literary Club. Cincinnati History in the Words of Literarians Who Made It. Poets of the Literary Club. Soldiers of the Literary Club. Forgotten Characters of the Literary Club.* Again, I acknowledge the ideas and suggestions of my predecessors, and repeat them because I think they are worthy of following up.

So: if your interest has been piqued by any of these, please sign up, perhaps with a couple of others, to begin the work of compiling the comprehensive bibliography of the Club. Or sign up to be reporter and recorder of contemporary publication information from the members. And I can imagine magazine article articles spinning off from our recently deceased brother Polk Laffoon's recent love story about our Club—as Tony Covatta and company styled it in Polk's recent memorial—in places like *Cincinnati* magazine. Articles about past notable literary Literarians like Clark B. Firestone or recently prolific and accomplished ones like Gibby Cary or Bill Burleigh, and about obscure yet colorful Literarians whose stories have been forgotten.

In conclusion of this night's Anniversary Observance, I am pleased to give the final words on the venerable traditions and origins of mens' clubs such as ours to the English-born writer Beryl Markham, famous aviator, whose memoir *West With The Night*, is the account of her growing up in Kenya. She observes, during a scene among men in a lively bar in Nairobi, "Poet or ploughman, statesman or derelict—every man has his Mermaid Tavern, every hamlet its shrine to conviviality, and in the image of the common spirit of those who haunt it, the character of the shrine is fashioned."

Gentlemen: though there are no derelicts among us, as for the rest of it, we have such a shrine in our Literary Club, and we are its character. As our motto boldly announces: "Let our light shine."

And as the pandemic ebbs, we hope, I wish us all a fruitful, word-filled one hundred and seventy-third year.

Thank you. We are adjourned.