

STEPPING INTO THE SAME RIVER TWICE

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Some 2,500 years ago, a small group of men living in various places around the Mediterranean embarked on a great adventure. The world was dark. If there had been such a thing then, a satellite photo of the world at night would have shown, save for the occasional erupting volcano, a globe devoid of light.

Today, in no small part thanks to that great adventure, these marvelous satellite photos show a world at night awash with brightness. The Eastern coast of the North American continent is clearly marked by a ribbon of light from Portland, Maine to Florida against the dark of the Atlantic. South Korea clearly contrasts with the darkness to the north, the fruit of a planned economy. The isles of Japan; London, Paris, Rome, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo and Rio; Cincinnati north along 1-75 towards Dayton and beyond, the world and its cities are afire with light.

And so things have changed in the past two and one-half millennia. But have they in essential respects? For that small group of men were engaged in the same endeavor at the heart and soul of our Literary Club today. They were bringing light out of darkness, and meaning out of seeming chaos, asking questions such as: "What does the world mean?", "What is it made of?", and finally, "Who are we?"

Let's ask that of them - Who were these men? I am speaking of the early Greek philosophers, the Pre-Socratics. They weren't actually an organized group as we are. Instead, they were largely individuals each acting in his own time and place, personally coming to grips with questions the human race was just beginning to answer in a formal way. I speak tonight especially of two of them -- Parmenides and Heraclitus.

Heraclitus would be pleased to see the modern satellite pictures of the world at night. He would think that it would prove his point that the nature of

things is fire. Like others of the Pre-Socratics, part of Heraclitus's inquiry was to discover the basic building blocks of existence. All of us know from our school studies that the basic elements were once thought to be four - earth, air, fire and water. Heraclitus was more reductive, coming to the conclusion that at the heart of all of this flux and change, the basic nature of things, was something identifiable but always shimmering, shifting, leaping, changing: fire.

Heraclitus's most famous soundbyte provides the title of this paper: "You can never step into the same river twice." You can say you know or see the Ohio, for instance, and there is something identifiable there, but the river, like life itself, is ever changing, ever shifting, the waters flowing ever downward.

At the other extreme was Parmenides of Elea, head of a school of thinkers prosaically called the Eleatics. Parmenides focused on the notion of "river" rather on the reality of the flowing waters. A pre-cursor of Plato and his notion of ideal form, expressed brilliantly and poetically in his myth of the cave in *The Republic*, Parmenides thought that all reality was permanence, and that change, the evanescent appearance of things that we see in this world is only illusion.

In sum, these two ancient Greeks set forth one of the most basic dichotomies of life: permanence and change. There are others intimately related to this: dark and light, cold and hot, stasis and movement - the list can be multiplied.

Robert Frost has said it for our own time in his poem "Fire and Ice":

Some say the world will end in fire;
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had a perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

We can say that fire and ice for Frost expresses the basic Heraclitean-Parmenidean dichotomy, with the added notion of death and destruction the end of all. And that is something that we see and something that we fear here in our own lives. As Frost says, the world ends. We fear that as men reaching a certain age. All is running downhill. The fire of life subsides into the ice, the cold and nothingness of death. But that is precisely where our own life in the Literary Club enters. For with its fusty traditions and thirst for form, the Literary Club is an attempt to fend off darkness and nothingness, and produce the light and warmth of shared knowledge and understanding in a comfortable and unchanging context. As I think we see, and as Plato saw, even if Heraclitus and Parmenides did not, the beginning of understanding comes from uniting change and permanence, seeing that the dichotomy can be reconciled: positive changes take place within a frame of permanence. Lasting values last because they take account of the changing world around them.

Given this portentous description of our Club, it seems appropriate to ask some basic, serious questions about our Club as we often do on these nights of the unchanging tradition of the annual meeting and the address by the President of the Club.

So let me wade right in. Are we so focused at the Literary Club on the permanent that we fear the lively principle of change? Are we guided by the homely, but perhaps fearful principle that "If it ain't broke, don't fix it?" While this time honored saw always appeals to me, and I am not so enamored of change that I would think I owned Abe Lincoln's ax when the handle had been replaced three times and the blade four, I think we should periodically take stock of where we are and where we could be: Our Club, like the Deacon's wonderful one hoss shay, should not be considered so logically perfect that it just disintegrates after a hundred years, as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, "to the day."

"Ah, ha, Covatta!" some of you say, "we have already lasted 155 years." All the more reason, say I, to protect and nourish our wonderful Club by thinking about who we are and where we have been, and also about where we are and where we are going. The world is wide. Cincinnati is much larger now than it was when it was the "Queen City of the West" in 1849 when our society was founded. Paradoxically, despite the City's growth, it is sobering to realize, that within the context of the larger United States Cincinnati has now been in decline for 150 years. Once a place that produced Presidents,

Attorneys General, Secretarys of the Treasury and Chief Justices, where national political conventions were held, Cincinnati has subsided into a regional center of continually lessening national importance. Nevertheless, the City has grown exponentially in absolute numbers. While the City is not so important to national life as it was formerly, it is a large, vigorous metropolis, full of a much less heterogeneous and much better educated populace than it was at mid 19th century.

Furthermore, we must admit that the Literary Club does not have the centrality to Cincinnati life that it seems to have had in 1849 when our society was founded. I suspect that it does not serve the same purpose or have the same outreach. The earnest quest for self-improvement that led a group of young men to found our Club in 1849 and vigorously debate the burning issues of the day has given way to a more contemplative and less active role for an older club with older members.

In a metropolitan area of two million people spread over 15 counties in three states, our body of 100 now represents only a very small slice of the demographic pie. One wonders whether it is narrower than it need be. The typical Literarian is a man of 75 years or so, who lives most likely in the 45208, 20 or 43 zip codes, who very well may be an Episcopalian and is probably a retired lawyer, doctor, academic or minister. The typical Literarian of today may well have gone to Harvard, Yale or Princeton. You know him and you see him not only here, but at the Symphony, the Opera, at the Esquire Theater and at Joseph-Beth bookstore.

We not only have the same portrait, we have a similar past. The typical Literarian grew up in an age when electricity and the automobile redefined American society. He knows less of the internet than he might and grew up in what was still a mechanical world, not an electronic one. He lived through the Depression, World War II, remembers JFK awakening the nation from the somnolence of the 50's, saw the death and destruction of the 60's and probably thinks that after the violence of the 60's our country has yet to regain its focus.

With these antecedents and our own ageing, and, I am talking about all of us, we Literarians see increasing disintegration in society and in ourselves. In the face of that, we thirst for permanence. If we felt that the world was manageable in the heady post World War II era, we now feel that it is slipping away from us like life itself and in that context, Literary Clubbers thirst for

form and a fixed reality. One of the endearing signatures of the Literary Club is our self-conscious, serio-comic but perhaps excessive adherence to form in the midst of meaningless flux and evanescence.

We sit here week after week, listening to the ever-modulating symphony of papers, delivered in the same format. Perhaps we are protecting ourselves against the disconcerting perception of Michel de Montaigne, the 16th Century essayist, who said in the most central of his essays, "The Apology for Raimond Sebonde," that the only permanent thing is change itself.

For myself, as I sit here night after night, I am comforted by the solidity of the place. In the unending march of papers one after the other, week after week, we can see change in the best sense, gradual insight into the minds and lives of our brethren. We learn more and more about our fellow Literarians, their thoughts and lives, and about the things they have learned about the world around them. This accumulation of wisdom, the increasing assurance of the permanence of change is comforting. While we are comforted by the thought of the celestial branch of the Literary Club as historian John Diehl has put it on another anniversary evening, we might elaborate on John's notion by taking comfort in the thought that we are gradually becoming part of the collective memory of this intellectual organism.

Does all this mean that we should avoid change in the form of our organism entirely? I don't think so. I would rather be part of the shimmering fire than the unyielding ice. Let me share with you a poem by William Butler Yeats which perhaps unifies permanence and change in a way that makes sense, and in the context of our Literary Club. The poem, "Sailing to Byzantium", has resonance for us as you will see from the very first line:

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 - Those dying generations - at their song,
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence;
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing-masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enameling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Yeats' great poem is about the transmutation of the specifics, the raw material of existence into the permanence of art. Byzantium is a figure of his, part of the mythology that he put together to enrich his poetry. It is a mythical place where art uses the specifics of existence to form the universal and achieves permanence of form. Even the old can serve a most useful purpose. Here at the Club, we seek not to be a paltry thing, as Yeats says an aged man can be, but we clap our hands and sing in our papers, and achieve a measure of immortality, however small. In our papers, we treat of the ever changing show: "what is past, or passing, or to come" the speaker has it in Yeats' Byzantium. You will notice in the poem more than an element of change: the passing show

is the raw material from which art is produced. There is also relevance to us. Are we not like the bird chanting and singing hour after hour, Monday night after Monday night to the lords (not ladies, of course) of Byzantium, to the drowsy emperor. Not asleep, but just drowsy. Drowsy? Is that not us Literarians? This room is our Byzantium, and here on Monday nights we can relax and be drowsy, but not asleep, just drowsing off as the papers go on, on our red leather thrones.

But this leads me to a more sobering question. Are we drowsing off in our outreach to others in the Cincinnati of the 21st Century? We have several vacancies. Who will fill them? Could we not find more westsiders? More blacks, Hispanics, Orientals? What about Northern Kentuckians? Xavier University professors and graduates? Would we not profit from the presence of more scientists, technologists others from disciplines other than law, medicine, religion, and the groves of academe? Is it not time to engage in outreach to other disciplines that enrich the experience of the Cincinnati that has developed over the last 150 years?

Finally, and some of you will shudder to hear me say it - what about women? Please relax: There is still room in America for single sex organizations. But I do not think there will be room for long for organizations that fail to take account of the world around them. I do think that this body must begin to think about the other half of the human race in ways it does not now do. As a start, I would like to change the way we too often think and talk in our papers and our discourse about the wives and lovers who send us off on these Monday nights. All too often, I think we smugly intimate that we are superior to women, that women are not literarily or intellectually inclined. The women of 2003 are not the wives and lovers of 1849. The world has changed. Anyone who practices law or medicine or even attends his daughter or granddaughter's soccer game knows that the women of today are more vigorous, assertive, self confident and informed, less deferential than their mothers, grandmothers and female ancestors. Perhaps some of our youngish members have thoughts on this subject, and there are initiatives they would wish to consider, without destroying the fabric of our Club: shared literary events with a women's group like Current Topics; forming an auxiliary organization not subject to gender challenge. There are lots of possibilities.

To begin to look at the reality around us, as our predecessors Heraclitus and Parmenides did, may well bring us to conclusions we cannot yet even

contemplate. If the Club is to maintain any relevance to society at all, and perhaps we don't want it to, but if it is, then I think we, as individuals, must begin to think about all the constituencies that are not at all represented in this group, not with apprehension, but with self-confidence. If we do, I think that the Literary Club will last, hopefully another 150 years. If we don't continue to grow and change within the well defined boundaries of our Literary Club, I fear that what fire there is in the Literary Club will inevitably burn out and leave us nothing but ice and darkness. At that point, that satellite photo of Cincinnati on Monday night would not be a little, but I think, a lot darker. Already on some occasions, I have had likely prospects for the Club decline the invitation to attend because of what is perceived as a misogynistic attitude. I don't want that to continue. I don't want this room to empty on the sacred Monday nights; to have the light and warmth we share fade into darkness.

This cannot happen. I stand with Heraclitus, not Parmenides. I see a future for the Literary Club not of ice but of fire. Nevertheless, we can step into the same river twice. We can step into the river of growth, of discovery, of learning, of meaningful change within the outlines and confines of our own natures and the basic nature of our Club. I look forward to us doing that in this year and in all the years of the Literary Club to come. Our time in the Literary Club and in life is brief. I am reminded of what the Venerable Bede said in his Ecclesiastical History regarding the nature of life. He used the metaphor of a sparrow flying into the medieval mead hall and out the other end:

The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all.

The Venerable Bede was, I think, too pessimistic. We can know something of what is to follow and what went before. That is what the Literary Club is all about. In our brief flight into flight into this lighted mead hall and out again, let us continue to the fullest and enjoy and learn from one another. Let us contemplate the change in world around us within the context of all that is good, bright and warm in our Club.

Gentlemen, I raise my glass and ask you to raise yours to our society together and to the Literary Club, may it grow, may it change and may it remain the same, may it live forever or as long as these things can be made to live. With reverence for permanence and tolerance of change, let us make it so.
