

Light Motifs

Good evening. Welcome to the one hundred and fifty-seventh anniversary of The Literary Club. Needless to say, I felt extremely honored being chosen, first, your Vice President, then, the following year, your President. This elevation in rank came as no great surprise, based on the Club's tradition of elections. However, the rapid and unexpected elevation from Clerk to Vice President caused my heart rate to rise slightly. This move proves that anything can happen, changes can occur, in our Club. Like the sun, the clerk also rises.

So, here I stand before you, proud yet humble, facing the challenge and responsibility you have given me of being elected your President. I want to assure every member here tonight that the Club, with its dedicated Board of Management, is and will continue to be in good and competent hands. I personally am optimistic about the future, where changes will undoubtedly be made for the betterment of the Club, while we maintain and cherish our unique tradition.

During my years in the Literary Club I have had the privilege of listening to papers with a wide range of topics and have become friends with many members. Every time I enter the Club, I experience the warmth and vitality of the place. I always look forward to conversing with old friends as well as with new members whom I want to get to know better.

Often, I am drawn to the library and there join in conversation with smokers and non-smokers, as well as those who are leafing through the red-bound volumes of Club papers. The library, as we know, contains a wealth of material relating to Club history. Above the mantelshelf, prominently displayed, is a plaque with the inscription: "The Literary Club of Cincinnati: Its Coat of Arms." You may recall last year when Gibby Carey, in charge of our haberdashery department, was selling ties displaying the Club crest composed of three torches and two writing instruments creatively arranged on a sable shield. The motto, on the plaque but not on the ties, reads "Luceat Lux Vestra," Latin for "Let Your Light Shine."

You may have also noticed that on the wall leading up the hall stairway is the framed coat-of-arms with the date 1849, the year of the founding of the Club. On the coat- of-arms

under the motto is the signature of G.B. Nicholson (full name: George Benson Nicholson), President of the Club in 1895. All of us are indebted to him not only for creating the Club's library and cataloging the books but also for designing and creating the Club's coat-of-arms, including the motto, "Luceat Lux Vestra," which was reproduced in the Club's book plate, which in turn was imprinted on the inside front cover of each of the volumes in the library.

You have noticed, I am sure, the window on the north wall of the library which bears Harvard College's crest, "Veritas," meaning Truth. (I recommend to you John Diehl's fine paper which he presented at the 1998 Anniversary Dinner concerning the Club's acquisition of this crest and its history). I cannot resist touting my own alma mater, Yale's, crest and motto, which is "Lux et Veritas," Light and Truth. I see this as a contrast to the rather restricted approach of Harvard's. Yale insisted that its college offered the essentials of learning: the "light" of knowledge derived from a liberal education and the "truth" of an established tradition.

Petty rivalries aside, I would now like to focus on the title of my paper, "Light Motifs," and on our Club's motto, "Let Your Light Shine," and discuss how Light can be tied symbolically with Truth.

Throughout the centuries there have been many references in literature to the symbolism of light. There are four excerpts I want to share with you tonight: excerpts from a poem, a play, the Bible, and an essay.

A poem by Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi teacher, storyteller and mystical poet, begins thus:

Who gets up early to discover the moment light begins?
Who lets a bucket down and brings up a flowing prophet?
Or like Moses goes for fire/ and finds what burns inside the
sunrise?

And continues a few verses later with the following advice:

Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others.
Unfold your own myth, without complicated explanation,
So everyone will understand the passage,
We have opened you...

Although stories of others may be interesting and captivating, Rumi says, they are not yours. Each of us has the opportunity to unfold his own story or myth truthfully "without complicated explanation," to light his own torch of inspiration, to release what is already there, allowing the light from within to express his innermost thoughts and feelings.

Another excerpt pertaining to light comes from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. In the opening scene, Vincentio, the philosophical Duke of Vienna, determined to leave the city for a period of time, offers this advice to his deputy, Angelo:

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
Did not forth of us, 't were all alike
As if we had them not.

We should heed the Duke's advice. Don't let the torch of inspiration be lit and not be used; you might as well not have it at all; rather, let it "go forth of us."

In the Gospel according to Matthew is this passage:

A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men
light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a
candlestick; and it gives light unto all that are in the house.

Similar to the Duke of Vienna's advice, Matthew is saying that we should not conceal that candle, that flame of creativity within us, but display it; by doing so, it will emit light "unto all that are in the house," unto all— it could be said— who are in this Club. Therefore, let our light shine among us as we share and unfold our myths and stories with each other and grow in knowledge and understanding of ourselves and of our fellow members.

We all possess the light of the liberally educated. And in many ways, our Club is like a university. In his 2002 Commencement address then President Lawrence Summers referred to

Harvard as "a place of veritas," meaning that it is a place open to all ideas, no matter what their source, that it is a place committed to "a diversity of perspectives" and to "a willingness to draw individuals from various backgrounds." This openness, he continues, "allows, indeed requires, data and insights from every direction to inform and influence our search for truth." Similarly, The Literary Club has a willingness to draw potential members from various professions and backgrounds and is indeed open to all ideas as they are expressed in the insightful papers carefully prepared and read on Monday evenings.

Closer to home, three revered past pillars of the Club - Eslie Asbury, Robert Hilton, and William Werner - in their respective Presidential papers stressed the importance of recognizing the light within us to create papers of quality.

In his 1982 Presidential paper, Robert Hilton had this advice for the newer members: "Looking forward rather than back, giving your best to the creation of a fine paper...will give you the happiness and enthusiasm which uniquely stem from artistic creativity." In his 1957 Presidential address, Eslie Asbury offered this advice: "Our member discovers that he has a superior and secret weapon, himself, that all he has to do is write from his inner self without strain about something he knows..."

If you haven't done so already, I urge you to pick up a copy and carefully read "The Annotated Concordance of The Literary Club of Cincinnati" edited by former president J. Roger Newstedt. Roger selected from The Vice President's Book informative essays and papers, containing much wit and wisdom, that shed light on the nature and functioning of the Club. We are indebted to him for making this material available to all of us.

Included in the Concordance is William Werner's classic 1965 Presidential paper titled "The Members and How They Function: What'll They Expect?" Near the conclusion, he addresses the newer members, the freshmen, of the Club saying the reason they were elected to membership was that, in his words: "Those who knew you best believed that your personality, talents, and experience would bring to our gatherings a congenial share of distinctive, creative

thought... the hope that your next paper will be accepted as a good one, and as a promise of more good ones, seems to me to be a sensible ideal to strive toward." The final paragraph of Werner's paper contains these memorable words: "As you gather with us, more and more you will value the development of respect, the deepening of appreciation, and the growing affection that come with each new year of comradeship in this, our 'delightful oasis in the encroaching desert.'"

At this point, I wish to address my remarks to our newer members. In your exposure to listening to numerous papers by seasoned members of the Club, you have gotten an idea of the wealth of diversified topics presented in those papers. Some of you, I am sure, after patiently waiting in the wings, are eager to come forth with a full-length paper.

Although changes have recently been made to incorporate our new members more quickly into the mainstream, I suggest that you seasoned Literarians ask one of our freshmen to contribute to your assigned budgets. This would give him the opportunity to provide the rest of us with a sampling of the light within him, of his "distinctive, creative thought."

Matthew Arnold, renowned poet, critic, and essayist of Victorian England, believed that the health of a society is indicated by the quality of its literature. For us here at The Literary Club, the health of the Club has been and continues to be indicated by the quality of its papers. Again, to reference Arnold in his essay, "Culture and Anarchy:" Arnold, a humanist and critic of his society, particularly of the middle class whom he referred to as "Philistines" because of their narrow and uncultured minds, believed that culture would be the remedy for the middle class's shortcomings.

Culture would improve society; it should be sought out of curiosity, meaning "a liberal and intelligent eagerness about things, ... a desire after the things of the mind simply for their own sakes and for the pleasure of seeing them as they are." To Arnold culture is a study of perfection. The pursuit of culture, "toward a true and satisfied ideal" is the pursuit of what he called "sweetness and light." The ancient Greeks, he wrote, were the "great exponents of

humanity's bent for sweetness and light united, of its perception that the truth of things must be at the same time beauty;" Greek intelligence had for its essence "the instinct for what Plato called the true, intelligible law of things: the law of light, of seeing things as they are."

Our Club, as Bill Werner wrote, is "a delightful oasis." It is also a cultural haven which provides an environment for limitless self-expression, where open-mindedness prevails and the ideal is the pursuit of excellence. In that pursuit each of us in writing our papers is challenged to be true to the creative light within us.

The Club includes members with a broad range of educational experience which is needed for us to continue to be exposed to new, intellectually stimulating and entertaining ideas. In contrast to the limitations of those Victorian "Philistines," we Literarians possess, to echo Arnold's words, "a liberal and intelligent eagerness about things, a desire after the things of the mind," and, I would add, a desire after the things of the heart.

We have that instinct for what Plato called "the law of light, of seeing things as they are" and we continually seek to pursue "the truth of things." The light within us pulls us toward that ideal. The Club is, referring to President Summers' statement about Harvard, a place of veritas, and, I would add, a place of light.

On the evening of March 20, 1897, G.B. Nicholson, who, as you recall, constructed the Club coat of arms, read a paper on lighthouses covering the period from ancient Egypt to the present. The conclusion of his paper reads as follows: "Gentlemen of the Literary Club, have you noticed the symbols on the coat-of-arms which hangs over your President's desk? The sable shield, typifying darkness; the three torches signifying the duty of this Club to shine as a light in the night, a beacon for future generations; and the motto, 'Luceat Lux Vestra'—'Let your light shine.'"

Robert Ralston Jones, Club President (1915-1916) and Historian (1920-1930), marveled at the scientific inventions and research of his day. He eloquently concludes his History of the Club paper in these words:

"Imagination is staggered at the possibilities of the future. Who shall limit the horizon of the human mind? Bounded on all sides by eternity, its power shall recognize no limit.

So with faces turned toward the Light of Morning, with love and reverence for our Past and no misgivings for the Future, let us follow the trail whose end lies in the world invisible."

Here we are many decades later having similar feelings about the times in which we live and about our Club. We continue to revere our past and its traditions, to embrace the present, and to anticipate the future with eagerness and hope. Those three torches on the coat-of-arms symbolize the light that shines within us and among us. May they continue to "shine as a light in the night" and be a "beacon for future generations."

Ethan B. Stanley II
157th Anniversary Dinner
October 30, 2006