

Anniversary Address
October 31, 2106
The Literary Club
Paul Franz

“O, for a muse of fire!”

Why are we here? That’s not to ask the BIG question that Bob Faaborg’s Logical Positivist friends (about whom more later) would say is meaningless and unanswerable.

Rather, let’s ask, why are WE (emphasis added) HERE (emphasis added)? What’s the essential character of this place? Yes, those positivists would call it an equally meaningless question. And others would say that the idea of a static character is a fallacy: for example, that we can understand how the Japanese could create haiku, ikebana, and war crimes if we first understand their view of character -- that it’s driven by context and the rules of situation, not essence.¹ And before we dismiss that idea as foreign and unapt, let’s note that George Washington biographers depict him as a man continually “constructing himself.”² One even summarized Washington as “a staged man, shrewd, purposeful, and effective.”³

If character is a variable, no wonder, then, that the hardy men of The Literary Club have hazarded many answers to the question. The “Soul of the Club,” its basic traditions, we’ve heard, are (a) to maintain a “Liberty Hall” where all papers are listened to with respect, and (b) (paradoxically) to take no position, official or unofficial, on any question.⁴ Was there ever a year that better proved the wisdom of point

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¹ Cathy N. Davidson, Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji, Dutton 1993 at 101-02.

² E.g., W.W. Abbott, “An Uncommon Awareness of Self: The Papers of George Washington;” from George Washington Reconsidered, Don Higginbotham, ed. U. Va. Press 2001 at 277.

³ Jill Lepore, “His Highness,” from The Story of America, Princeton U. Press 2012 at 135-6.

⁴ Eslie Asbury, “Club Traditions and Myths,” 125th Anniversary Volume at 7.

This Club is not, we've heard from the same writer, "merely a place where one old man tries unsuccessfully each week to keep 40 old men awake for 40 minutes."⁵ That, we've heard, is a "canard."

We are more. For President MacLeod, inspired by Robert Bly's book "Iron John," we were "The Company of Men," partaking in the ur-old traditions of the shaman, the woodsman, and the wise man, and were thus a generator of "positive male energy." To paraphrase the line from *Faust*, here "*das ewig Männliche zieht uns hinan*."⁶

Tongue in cheek, we've even been compared to some card-playing good old boys passing the jug down by the river.⁷ That is a worthy pastime, especially if good cigars go with the jug.

So varied has this night's answer been to "Why are we here", that President Covatta took us all the way back to the Pre-Socratic philosophers for his essay on permanence, change, and The Literary Club.⁸ He came out firmly in the camp of Heraclitus, who never saw man stepping into the same river twice. Or to bring his reference closer to home, we don't even step into the same buffet line twice.

Now, in *The Literary Club*, a reference to Pre-Socratic philosophy can never be amiss. And a writer on the pre-Socratics observed that in the search for something bigger than oneself (a thing which a club *by definition* is), man "tends to reach out imaginatively in one or more of three general directions – the upward, the downward, and the inward."⁹

⁵ Eslie Asbury, Presidential Address, 1957.

⁶ "The eternally masculine draws us onward." In *Faust*, it's the "eternally feminine" (*das ewig Weibliche*).

⁷ Bill Burleigh, 102d Anniversary Address.

⁸ Anthony G. Covatta, "Stepping Into the Same River Twice," October 27, 2003 Anniversary Address.

⁹ Philip Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, Odyssey Press 1966 at 2.

The Club has throughout its life offered members that something bigger than themselves. We have literally and literarily created our own pantheon. Our founders are the “Twelve Immortals,” now resident in “The Celestial Branch.” We here in what we could call the Terrestrial, or Sublunary, Branch, might be seen as the Club Militant, *en route* to join that Club Triumphant. No writing samples, let’s hope, will be required. And a Board of Management there would seem ... superfluous.

Readers of the “The Annotated Concordance of The Literary Club,” edited by Roger Newstedt (a pamphlet each of you should have gotten and read), will know that we also have our own liturgy, with strictures on who says what when, and where he is when he does so.

Our efforts can readily be ranged under the rubrics of upward, downward, and inward. For upward, we’ve flights to the worlds of poetry: consider Richard Stewart’s mock-epic poem describing a trip to Kenwood Mall. It begins:

Here at this populous mall, though seasons may be lost,
 Night is comfortable as day and holidays are eternal.
 Vast whirring systems made by man, by him invented,
 Illuminate, heat and cool beyond mere nature’s sun.
 Meteorological spheres within spheres frustrate Copernicus
 To Ptolemy’s satisfaction. The Aristotelian smug at his
 Reinstatement. Bold youths may now skate carefree over
 Marble floors worthy of a cathedral. The way opens
 For them as for a new-found choir of angels: teens,

Mid-teens, pre-teens, diminutives. With Walkmen they fly to

Celestial music that they hear.¹⁰

Richard's all-too-few papers are among our most "literary." Searching them out is worth the effort.

Robert Faaborg looked upward to the realm of thought when he argued that our friends the Logical Positivists (in whose study, he noted, with a reference to a certain sports team owner, he was "good in the beginning") crabbed his chosen field of philosophy by limiting it to the axiomatic, the verifiable, and thus, the trivial. We learned that his philosophy colleagues called him a traitor when he – of all things – decided to teach business ethics. There are probably few fora where a philosopher could comfortably assert that a phase of orthodox thought damaged the field, and we should celebrate having one of them.

For the downward looking, we have (in addition to our Epicurean pre-and post-paper revels), our Rabelaisian papers. Of these, a master is Gibby Carey. Gibby's papers always give the answer to Google searches you didn't know to make, but can't wait to know the results of. Those include:

- What are the sequelae of firing an elephant gun into the side of a swimming pool? You should read the full answer in his paper, but in sum: when the firing is by the sixteen- year-old son of the gun's absent owner, those sequelae are many, and they are fraught.¹¹

And this one:

- What is an Army mess sergeant's response when ordered by a shave tail lieutenant to butcher a dog, so that a visiting Asian head of state could enjoy his favorite dish while staying at Fort Bragg? Look for yourself, but in briefest summary, the answer is not "Yes, sir!"¹²

¹⁰ Richard N.P. Stewart, "The Postlude: or The Mall," March 11, 1996.

¹¹ "The Swimming Pool," G. Gibson Carey IV, September 28, 2009.

¹² "Whatever It Takes," G. Gibson Carey IV, December 17, 2003.

Gibby is a storyteller who makes magic not only at our dais, but at our tables. Here's some table talk that belongs in our records:

When his children were young, Gibby and AK raised cattle on their Newtown farm. One frosty morning, his young daughter's chore was to move a reluctant steer from barn to pasture. When kicks and prods were failing to move the beast, Gibby reported his daughter added this verbal encouragement:

"I'll see you on a plate, you son of a bitch!"

Perhaps revenge is a dish not always best served cold.

Of the inward-looking: our Club has hardly been populated by mystics, but it has been graced by gifted memoirists. Our best memoirists have recognized, and reflected on, the implications for a writer of a truth recently noted by, of all people, Jerry Lewis at age 90. And that truth is this:

"A wonderful thing happens over time. ... You fall in love with the sound of your own voice."¹³

That is to say, our best memoirists recognize that while they're the center of THEIR universe, they're not the center of THE universe. Jack Davis's recent "An American Story," a memoir that wasn't about Jack Davis, showed that awareness. So too, did Al Lopez's fine "Compadre."

That *isn't* to say that our great memoirists haven't written about themselves. Bob Norrish was one of our finest. (That observation has been made more than once on this annual occasion.) And Bob rarely

¹³*New York Times*, "Jerry Lewis at 90: His Mouth Runneth Over," September 10, 2016.

wrote here about anything *but* himself. Even his letters to his long-dead parents were as much about Bob as about the recipients. But when Bob wrote about himself, he did it with honesty and humility.

Consider these memories, recalled thirty-two years after the death of his father:

Reading the St. Louis newspaper obituaries, I counted the column inches and resented the Post-Dispatch for giving him less copy than the Globe Democrat. And of course I counted the house at the funeral – as if this were somehow the measure of the man. ...

Having found a way to feel self-important about all this, I began wondering: Will I be active enough in my community, will I join clubs, serve on boards, get elected to this and that so my obituary writer will have enough to work with?¹⁴

Taken together, Bob's papers gave us the private man breaking through a public persona imposed by expectations he long, faithfully (and perhaps ruefully) lived up to. When he wrote about retirement, he first set up, and knocked down, that public man:

When people ask me what I'm doing with my time, now that I'm retired and no longer working for a living, my first instinct is to give a good, acceptable answer that will justify my existence. So I usually launch into a windy, self-important description of my crowded calendar, full of community commitments, board meetings, committee activities and so on. Morning, noon, and night, busy, busy, busy. Harrumph! Harrumph! Harrumph!

¹⁴ "And You, My Father," Robert M. Norrish, May 7, 1990, at 2.

But what I'd really like to say is: I've been woolgathering.¹⁵

He went on to explain:

The original woolgatherers were people who wandered, apparently aimlessly, around the countryside, gathering pieces of wool left by sheep as they brushed by bushes and fences. ...

Today, woolgatherers are more into imagination.¹⁶

As with Gibby, there's some oral history of Bob that belongs in our records. Shortly after Bob's "Woolgathering" paper in April of 1995, he went to a fundraising dinner. He and his wife Dawn sat at a table with a local newscaster. The newsman asked what Bob was doing in retirement. Bob described his Literary Club efforts, including his paper on the very subject of retirement, "Woolgathering." The conversation must have come after some cocktails, because it led the newsman to ask,

"So, Bob, do you *spin* the wool?"

Well, at least – metaphorically -- he did.

Bob's paper on his second (and ultimately fatal) fight with cancer began

On the evening of April 10, 1991, one day after my 57th birthday, I returned home from playing tennis and pissed blood.¹⁷

Months, and minus one kidney, later, he found:

And simple things become important and beautiful. Walking down the driveway in the morning for the paper – I like to look forward to an amazing day. High in the still-dark, clear morning sky,

¹⁵ "Woolgathering," Robert M. Norrish, April 17, 1995.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ "Most this Amazing Day," Robert M. Norrish, Dec. 7, 1992

there's Orion, with Betelgeuse and Rigel at shoulder and foot. And the Pleiades. In the east the crescent moon rising, bright Jupiter alongside – amazing. The first sip of coffee and the second, with the newspaper – what a life!¹⁸

“[T]he first sip of coffee in the morning, and the second “ Whenever you find yourself dreading the day to come, think on that.

Bob's last paper got to the editors of *The Cincinnati Post*, who wanted to publish it. It was a fine piece that presented only one editing issue: the word “pissed.” Would Bob consider another word?

He would not.

“I wrote ‘pissed.’ If you want to print the piece I wrote, print ‘pissed.’”

They printed “pissed.”

Now, this excursion on Bob Norrish comes with a purpose. If character is an act of will as much as an act of nature, and we wish to generate positive male energy here, Bob offers us a character to will to be like. The Club recognizes its “Immortals” – not only the original twelve, but also later worthies like Eslie Asbury, Victor Reichert, Bob Hilton, and others. But lest that long grey line – and grey is after all our color – end somewhere around the first Bush administration, let's honor another who belongs in that rank – a member who wrote honestly, humbly and well, and offers us a model for how to spin our wool.

¹⁸ *Id.*