

The Shabby Curate

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Presidential Address on the occasion of
The 156th Anniversary of the Literary Club

Those of you who are familiar with the English novels of the 18th and 19th centuries, or who have lived for any length of time in a small English village, as I did in my early practice days, will not be fazed by the title of my paper. For those of you who remain puzzled I crave your patience as my tale unfolds.

What words dear friends can I impart
The product of both mind and heart
What distillate, what essence rare,
Digestible, post-prandial fare,
Expression of our gratitude,
Unspoiled by common platitude,
For papers that each week are brought
From brimming minds full rich with thought
But I was warned; "Please...keep it light,
We're here to celebrate to-night!"
My mind alive to this request
I now will try to do my best

But first, why the verse?

In Ireland where I come from, on a celebratory evening such as this, it is not unusual for the speaker to break out into verse. Why this is so is hard to fathom. Voltaire pointed out that "Poetry expresses more in fewer words than does prose". To my mind this is contrary to the generally held view that the Irish love to talk, preferably at length; the more words the better. In fact, Dublin, my home-town, has earned the title of "Words City of the World". Maybe this lack of verbal restraint has something to do with Celtic emotionality; the need to share inner thoughts, bursting to be expressed in some colorful turn of phrase; a love of poetry, and especially a love of rhyme. The famous literary Dubliner, Oscar Wilde, no mean poet himself, claimed that rhyme was invented by the Irish. Ireland just loves its poets. They are looked upon as a breed apart, endowed with some mystical gift in the use of words. Poetry is so much respected in Ireland that any earnings derived from writing poetry are not subject

Blow, blow thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude
Thy tooth is not so keen
Because thou art not seen
Although thy breath be rude
Heigh-ho! sing heigh ho! unto the green holly,
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly,
Then, heigh-ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly.

A tiny sparkle from *As You Like It*, in the Bard's great treasure house of literary gems, presented to the London public two hundred and fifty years before the Edinburgh trained physician and philologist, Peter Mark Roget compiled his writer's aid, that even the great Yeats turned to from time to time.

Shakespeare's plays, greatest of all time,
Mostly blank verse, save when uses rhyme
Robert Frost, once our honored guest,
Expressed his views, perhaps in jest,
"Compared with rhyme, blank verse is an easier bet,
It's like playing tennis, without a net"
Poetry, just words at play?
Rhythm, sound and meaning fusing
May be sad, may be amusing
Choice of words and their alignment
Makes for coarseness, or refinement
May be subtle or ethereal
May be made of dull material
May send to sleep, may stir the mind
May move the heart, may rouse mankind
Poetry just words at play?
Some is trivial, some tremendous
Shakespeare into raptures sends us
In blank verse, Elliot may confuse
Unless in "Waste Land" you enthuse

Within these literary walls poetry's now seldom heard,
As if we no longer cared,
Goldsmith, who hung him on the wall?
Behind the bar, on view to all,
Who loved him so
Irish poet of long ago?
The 20th century, had just begun,
Nineteen hundred years and one
Club Member, B. Rush Cowen
Cincinnati of renown
Lawyer, writer and much more
General in the Civil War
Goldsmith's poems loved to recite
To our Member's great delight

I like to think the good General might have recited Goldsmith's "Elegy on a Mad Dog" at an evening meeting of the Dr. Samuel Johnson's Club as portrayed in the picture hanging in our library. I will attempt to recite the poem as Dubliner Goldsmith might have done at the Johnson Club, where he aired his poems before they were published.

"An Elegy on a Mad Dog"

In Islington there was man,
Of whom the world might say,
That still a godly race he ran,
When'er he went to pray.

A kind and gentle heart he had,
To comfort friends and foes;
The naked every day he clad,
When he put on his clothes.

And in that town a dog was found,
As many dogs there be,
Both mongrel nunny whelp and hound

And while they swore the dog was mad,
They swore the man would die.

But soon a wonder came to light,
That showed the rogues they lied:
The man recovered of the bite,
The dog it was that died.

The painting bought at Closson's store
Joins us to that Club of yore
Where Johnson, Swift, Goldsmith and Burke
To coffee house, The Head of Turk
Each week repaired for talk and food
No ill-bred matters did intrude
Prose and verse filled the air
Words flowed beyond compare
Johnson's Club in London's SOHO
Inspired our Club in O-HI-O.

In this scientific age poetry seems to have lost some of its popular appeal. It does not mix too easily with modern science. The poet, W.H. Auden, wrote; "When I find myself in the company of scientists I feel like a Shabby Curate who has strayed by mistake into a drawing room full of dukes". He went on; "Poetry does not celebrate science, whose deeds are concerned with things and is therefore speechless". Personally I do not fully agree with Auden; surely anything that excites the mind or stirs the imagination can be translated into poetry.

As a family doctor I have spent many years looking after patients in what I like to think of as the more poetic, humanistic part of medicine, compared with the more highly technical, scientific, molecular part. Forty years ago in England when I left my village general practice to start an academic G.P. unit at Guy's Hospital Medical School, at London University, surrounded by Guy's scientific elite, I felt like Auden's shabby curate. It was as if I had come from a different medical world, speaking a different language.

About this time C.P. Snow, the English novelist, had published his controversial lecture, the "Two Cultures", delivered at Cambridge University. Although not specifically dealing with medicine he hit the nail on the head as far as I was concerned as a new member

received a doctorate in physics and was soon elected to the coveted post of Fellow of Christ College. His research was unproductive and he decided he could never be an Einstein; he would write novels instead. He continued at Cambridge as a college administrator and wrote prodigiously. His series of 11 novels "Strangers and Brothers" was based on his own experience in academe and were widely read.

During World War II Snow made a major contribution towards winning the Battle of Britain by marshalling the best scientists he could find to develop the radar network that played so important a role in the Battle of Britain. In all, he wrote 25 books and several plays, which were hits in London and in New York. He received 31 honorary doctorates, including two awarded in Cincinnati, one from UC and the other from HUC. He was knighted for his war work and later was made a lord, with the title of Baron of Leicester, his home town. This enabled him to act as under-Secretary for Science and Technology for the Labor Government with a seat in the House of Lords. He found party politics too confining, He angered his Labor colleagues by sending his son to Eton instead of to one of the new state schools. When challenged about this by his socialist colleagues, he blithely replied, "It's because it's the best school in England". He treated the House of Lords as his private club and once invited me to dine there. He greeted me warmly at the bar with a large scotch in his hand and one already poured for me.

By now you may be wondering how a village GP, then a shabby curate among the scientists, became a friend of so eminent a person, a virtual Colossus, with one foot planted in literature and the other in science. The answer can be found hidden in his biography, under the heading "et cetera". Between awards from the Catholic University of America and the Albert Einstein Medical Center is the entry "President, British Migraine Association".

Snow never had a headache in his life, but his wife, Pamela Hansford Johnson, a successful novelist in her own right, was a severe migraine sufferer. I was then working with a group of colleagues trying to generate more interest in the problem of migraine. In one of her novels Pamela had described an attack so vividly that she had to be a sufferer. We approached her for support which she generously gave, notably persuading her distinguished husband to lead our organization; as you might expect, this helped us enormously.

We had the special pleasure of having the Snows as our guests in Chapel Hill, North Carolina where I worked before coming to Cincinnati. He had been invited to give one of the University's distinguished lectures. Snow was a large man, both tall and wide. He moved slowly and spoke gently with a cultivated Cambridge University accent. His wife was petite and vivacious and spoke rapidly. They both smoked heavily and enjoyed their Scotch. I picked them up at the airport and delivered them to the presidential suite at the Carolina Inn in the heart of the beautiful Chapel Hill campus. Having settled them in their lovely quarters I

engaged throughout. Much to my wife's chagrin they ate little of the beautiful meal she had prepared. Instead they made a serious dent in our drink supplies.

Snow urged the students to protect their precious sense of humanity they had brought with them to medical school, and not allow it to be swamped by the increasing load of scientific matter they were being required to master.

I did not take notes at that dinner, but the gist of his urging I remember went something like this:

You must learn from your senses as well as your mind,
Striving to better the lot of mankind,
Mingle science and art, test-tube and pen,
Make room in your mind for the work of such men
As Swift with his wit and Shaw with his knife
Sharpening your minds, enriching your life.

Snow died at the age of 75 in 1980, quaffing scotch and smoking heavily to the end. Pamela died one year later. His ashes are buried in the grounds of his beloved Christ College. His death wish was that the great sage Hillel's three questions of over two thousand years ago, be inscribed on his memorial:

"If I am not for myself, then who else will be for me?"
"If I am only for myself, then what am I?"
And the challenge to all of us procrastinators,
"If not now, when?"

The great English poet Wordsworth went even further than Snow's urging to achieve a balance between science and literature. Wordsworth brushing this aside, gave the ultimate primacy to our inborn feelings about the nature that surrounds us.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.
Sweet is the lore that Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beautiful forms of things