

# WORDS

by

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## WORDS

The title of this paper was carefully selected with two thoughts in mind. One, I wanted to present a paper on a topic directly related to the activities of The Literary Club. "Words," I submit, suffices for this purpose. In addition, I wanted to disguise the subject matter of this paper as completely as possible. There is a strong tradition in the Club, amounting almost to a competition, for authors to put as much distance as possible between title and subject matter. Just as it is often said that you cannot know a book by its cover, here you will rarely know a paper by its title. In any event, the title "Words" is my entry in this long-standing contest.

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In an entertaining and thoughtful essay reprinted this past year from *The American Scholar*, Joseph Epstein, a frequently published writer and the editor of that publication, asked the question, "What do I live for?" This was his answer:

Apart from love for my family and friends, I live for words. I live for the delights of talking and reading and writing. I am content when talking with people I adore or admire or at least feel I can learn a little something from; I am happy when I am reading something fine or subtle or powerful; and I am delirious when I am writing something of which I am not altogether ashamed.<sup>1</sup>

Thus I am certain it is with all of us. Words, and activities which are built upon or around words, are uniquely an important and meaning-

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ful part of our lives, facts which are testified to by our membership in this Club.

My own early experiences with words are hardly the stuff of autobiography. I ask your indulgence, therefore, as I begin my paper with a few childhood reminiscences. I was born in Hammond, Indiana, and grew up there in the 1930s and 40s. While Hammond may perhaps never achieve the near-mystical status occupied by Kankakee, Illinois in the annals of this Club,<sup>2</sup> it was nevertheless a city of remarkable diversity and fascinating possibilities for a boy in his early years. Languages from all over the world were spoken within blocks of our doorstep, not as a result of any scholarly community emphasis on foreign language skills, but only because of the presence of a broad sprinkling of immigrants who had come to this country with their native speech intact and found employment in the steel mills and railroads and other industries in and around Hammond.

With that inborn propensity of youth for mischief, my friends and I were constantly in motion in our little world, scrambling over and under fences, dodging through backyard flower and vegetable gardens, taking to the trees like monkeys, and conquering the highest garage roof-tops, always at a safe distance from those who sought to suppress our youthful endeavors, but at the same time within earshot of thundering volleys of foreign invective. These words we did not understand, but we knew their import, and learned early that there are some words in any language that are spoken mostly in anger.

As a small child, a few years before I established myself as a behavioral problem in our neighborhood, I often sat beside my mother and grandmother as they read stories to me from children's books. On occasion I was presumptuous enough to take one of my favorite books and pretend to read it aloud, turning the pages with a studied determination that appeared to me to be appropriate to the nature of that undertaking. I was always cheered along in this activity, and other members of the family were sometimes called to witness these performances, pretending in turn to believe that I was in fact reading words from the printed page. While I harbored a tiny suspicion that all of this pretending—mine and theirs—was somewhat fraudulent, I was nevertheless delighted by the attention that I received on these occasions, and there were times when the applause was so convincing to me that I actually

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believed myself to be reading. Such is the subtle power of flattery when applied to young, unformed minds.

None of these early experiences prepared me for my formal encounter with words in first grade. Kindergarten, I might add, was not an obstacle. Lacking the upscale challenges of the modern-day curriculum, it was principally—at least in Hammond, Indiana—a modest experiment with structure and socializing outside of the family unit. Not wetting one's pants in school (or worse) was typical of the grand criteria by which we were judged. In any event, having been successfully promoted from kindergarten, I cheerfully concluded that I was ready for first grade, although I recollect having an uneasy feeling that a great deal more would be expected of me during the next school year. . . .

Fastened like a banner above the blackboard on the front wall of our first grade classroom were the 26 letters of the English alphabet—printed in block capital and small letters, each five or six inches high. No problem there, I thought, because I had already learned to recite the alphabet. I had, however, only memorized sounds and not letters, and it soon occurred to me that this was going to present a problem. And indeed it did. I found that I was unable to identify by sight many of the letters that I was able to pronounce. More than that, mere letters would no longer suffice. We were now expected to identify combinations of letters—words, if you will—and I was somehow not ready for that incredibly more difficult task.

On an almost daily basis, one syllable words were presented to us in flash-card exercises. There were many such words to test and torture our understanding, but the entry-level words in those exercises were “cat” and “dog.” “Dog?” “Cat?” “What’s going on!” I wondered. I knew a dog when I saw one, and a cat, too, but the truth was, I didn’t know a flash-card dog from a flash-card cat. In fact, I could not identify any of the words, and from my frightened perspective all of the flash-cards might as well have been blank. I can recollect to this day the mortification I felt as I sat drowning in a sea of complete stupification, the dim waters swirling around my head.

At the end of those first six weeks of first grade, I carried home a report card with an “E” in reading, which was the equivalent of the modern day “F.” There was no precedent for such a report. My mother and father were stunned. I knew from their whispered conversation that

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evening that this was serious business, and I dimly understood that I had broken a generations-long tradition of family literacy. A succession of parent-teacher conferences followed, and a remedial home flash-card program was inaugurated. I toiled daily at these exercises over a period of many weeks. The worst part of all of this, I recall, was having to stay home after school on those golden early autumn afternoons, feeling my childhood slowly ebbing away. A day came, however, when the words began to take shape before my eyes, and I experienced the exhilaration of first learning to read. It seemed to happen all at once, and I cannot explain how. I can only liken it to learning to ride a bicycle, wherein, after weeks of futile effort, one finds himself suddenly balanced on two wheels and is left puzzled by how such a simple act could once have been so enormously difficult.

This small episode, I might add, has a denouement. Several weeks ago, I asked my mother whether she could remember those distant, painful days when I struggled to attain a semblance of academic footing with my young peers. She replied that she could not, and perhaps she spoke from kindness or out of the bliss of forgetfulness that comes with the passing of many years. I rather suspect, however, that she is reluctant, even now, to acknowledge the possibility of a dunce in the bloodline—at least on her side of the family.

Many years later, notwithstanding these halting beginnings, I acquired a fascination for words that has sometimes bordered on obsession. I recall, for example, the discovery of that slender volume entitled *30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*. First published in 1942, this book—popularizing such two-fisted words as *expiate*, *saturnine*, *tyro*, and *uxorious*—has been a boon companion to thousands of high school students preparing for finals or about to take their college entrance examinations. I recall, also, the discovery of *Roget's Thesaurus* (the word *thesaurus* literally meaning “treasure”), a tool so powerful that a high school sophomore is able to use it to make a veritable hash of a one paragraph English assignment. Later on, I became familiar with a volume entitled *A Treasury of the World's Great Speeches*, in which great men and events were immortalized by the spoken word. Most important of all, however, was simply the English language dictionary, a book (if I may refer to it as such) which, like so many words found there, has its own interesting history, and in that connection, let us now praise famous men of letters.

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Samuel Johnson is best known to us through that voluminous and remarkable biography written by his friend James Boswell. Born in 1709, the son of a poor bookseller, Johnson became a prominent literary critic and is generally acknowledged as the first writer to compile an organized dictionary of the English language. His great work, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, was published in 1755 and served as the standard for information about English words for nearly a century. In order to illustrate the meanings of words, he selected quotations from the best writers and scholars, and his *Dictionary* thus became a vast compendium of human knowledge and learning. In the preparation of a recently published book,<sup>3</sup> Robert DeMaria, Jr. analyzed the context of the 116,000 illustrative quotations in the *Dictionary*. In so doing, he was able to highlight Johnson's views on such subjects as truth, the soul, the arts and sciences, freedom, death, and human life and happiness, and thus to connect Johnson with the intellectual assumptions of eighteenth century England.

A few examples will illustrate Dr. Johnson's method. The subject of man's continuing search for happiness surfaces in a number of quotations included in the *Dictionary*. Thus, to illustrate the meaning of the word "pursue," Johnson quotes Matthew Prior, an eighteenth century English poet: "We happiness *pursue*; we fly from pain; / Yet the pursuit, and yet the flight is vain." For the word "hardy," the *Dictionary* contains the following quotation, underscoring the uncertainty of life: "Is a man confident of his present strength? An unwholesome blast may shake in pieces his *hardy* fabrick." Other quotations emphasize the general strain of pessimism regarding human life that appears throughout the *Dictionary*. For "yesterday" we are given the following from *Job*: "We are but of *yesterday*, and know nothing, because our days on earth are a shadow." And for the word "shadow," the well-known words from *Macbeth*:

Life's but a walking *shadow*, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more.

Notwithstanding the serious moral and intellectual purpose that underlies the *Dictionary*, Johnson was not without humor, or prejudice, as illustrated by his definition of the word "oats," which he says is "a grain,

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which in England, is largely given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people."

Johnson's *Dictionary* was written within the great encyclopedic tradition of lexicography. Indeed, he makes his intention clear in that regard in his preface to the first edition:

When first I collected these authorities, I was desirous that every quotation should be useful to some other end than the illustration of a word; I therefore extracted from philosophers principles of science; from historians remarkable facts; from chymists complete processes; from divines striking exhortations; and from poets beautiful descriptions. . . . When the time called upon me to arrange this accumulation of elegance and wisdom into an alphabetical series, I soon discovered that the bulk of my volumes would fright away the student, and was forced to depart from my scheme of including all that was pleasing and useful in English literature. . . .<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning Johnson looked forward to hours which he could "revel away in feasts of literature" and enter and ransack "the obscure recesses of northern learning."<sup>5</sup> In the end he realized, in his own words, that "these were the dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer."<sup>6</sup>

Although Johnson was unable to give full sweep to his intention, his more than 100,000 illustrative quotations encompass a remarkable range of scholarship and literature. Representative authors in that regard include Joseph Addison, the great English essayist and founder of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*; Francis Bacon, essayist, philosopher, statesman and jurist; Richard Bentley, critic and philologist, held by many to be England's greatest classical scholar; George Berkeley, Anglican bishop and philosopher; Sir John Davies, English poet and attorney-general for Ireland in his later years; John Dryden, poet, dramatist, and critic; John Locke, the intellectual ruler of the eighteenth century; Alexander Pope, poet and satirist, whose lines are probably quoted more than any English author with the exception of Shakespeare; Johnathan Swift, Protestant preacher and satirist, who became a hero in Roman Catholic Ireland; and Isaac Walton, fisherman and author. Johnson's use of quotations was in fact so extensive that one critic complained that his method tends "to interpret the import of the context, and not to explain the individual meaning of the word."<sup>7</sup> And Samuel Taylor Coleridge said



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that while this volume was "most instructive and entertaining" as a *book* . . . a "philosophic and thorough scholar" would give it "but qualified praise" as a *dictionary*.<sup>8</sup>

As late as the nineteenth century some readers still saw dictionaries as books and read them as such, and many, I suspect, occasionally read them as books today. I confess to having engaged in this pleasant pastime, and if this activity seems too sedentary, somehow too fixed in scope, in a world whose many parts have otherwise been made accessible to us, let us not forget the words of the early American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who said, "I have travelled a good deal in Concord."<sup>9</sup> Neither should we forget in this regard the example of the great Kant, who never travelled more than 40 miles from the place of his birth, nor that of the immortal Mike Ditka, who spent most of his early years on a rectangular plot of land measuring 360 feet long and 160 feet wide. In truth, if we have learned anything from the great books, it is that the life of the mind counts most, and the dictionary is an indisputable companion in this pursuit.

All of us know that some persons have a greater facility with words than others. The sports pages constantly remind us of that fact. One former Big Ten coach, who I hope will write a book someday, entertained his post-game press audience on a weekly basis during the football season. On one such occasion, he declared that his team would have won the game if they had scored more points than the other team. In the same vein, an award of some sort should go to Dale Berra, who was asked to compare his talents with those of his famous father Yogi and replied, "Our similarities are different." None of this approaches the majesty of Shakespeare, but we do not expect it to, nor do we much care, although Shakespeare offers us examples of word usage that inspire as much laughter and delight as anything that gets spoken today in the sports arena.

Along slightly different lines, an interesting form of self-expression has become increasingly popular in our culture. Some years ago yellow plastic cards in the shape of miniature traffic caution signs began appearing in the rear windows of automobiles. These signs bore the words "Baby on Board," and it is not clear to me to this day whether this was merely a happy proclamation of parenthood or was intended instead as some sort of dark warning to other drivers on the road. To another ele-

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ment of the population, however, these signs were viewed as evidence of a peculiar form of soft-headedness, and they began to respond with similar signs reading "Baby in Trunk," "Baby in Glove Compartment," and "Childish Adult on Board." This response so infuriated the baby-on-boarders that they launched their own offensive in the form of angry letters to editors of newspapers across the country. This mindless controversy simmered in the press for several months, and finally subsided, as I recall, about the time of the meltdown of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl.

Our own resident quarterback became a part of this modern-day phenomenon when he appeared on the football field one fall Sunday afternoon wearing a headband on which were scribbled some letters in black ink. I cannot remember what word or words were written there, but I do recall that they prompted some concerned remarks on the part of Commissioner Pete Roselle. That following Sunday, McMahon, who has never turned his back on a challenge, appeared wearing another headband, the inscription this time more legible, and was accompanied in this affront to the dignity of the National Football League by three or four other defenders of the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. It is not clear whether Roselle now saw this as a direct attack on his authority or possibly perceived it as a more fundamental threat to the values of an ordered society. In any event, by the end of the following week, fines had been levied and paid, threatened lawsuits shelved, hands shaken all around, and players throughout the League cheerfully returned to their happy pursuit of breaking one another's arms and legs.

These exercises in self-proclamation have taken many forms. Tatoos, bearing such endearing inscriptions as "Mother," "Home," "Sweetheart," "Light My Fire," "Death," or worse, are no longer in favor. Their place has largely been taken by T-shirts, a billion-dollar word industry, which display inscriptions ranging from the sayings of Chairman Mao to the formula for Einstein's special theory of relativity. A similar phenomenon has been with us for perhaps a longer time in the form of the ubiquitous bumper sticker. This practice probably got its start in political campaigns, but has spread far beyond. Today we not only witness the names of Bush and Dukakis transported along crowded expressways and through polluted intersections, but are also subjected to hundreds

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of exhortations, threats, insults, obscenities, and an infinitude of other expressions of a generally witless nature. In my 35 or 40 years of driving, the only bumper sticker that gave me pause for further reflection is the one that read "King Kong Died For Our Sins."

A few moments ago, I referred briefly to William Shakespeare. On that subject, those of us who have fallen under Shakespeare's spell are lifetime prisoners. Apart from the remarkable interaction of character in his plays, they can be appreciated solely on the basis of style and his masterful employment of words. An example familiar to all of us is the soliloquy generally regarded as one of the greatest ever written in the English language—the one from *Hamlet*, in which the Prince of Denmark muses about life and death. The literature of death is vast and deep. Plato said that philosophy is the study of death, and lectures to us on the immortality of the soul.<sup>10</sup> Our own American preoccupation with the subject is an interesting contemporary phenomenon; and in that connection, I wish to note here that the character who was played by Olympia Dukakis in the film *Moonstruck* was told upon repeated questioning that men chase young women because men are afraid of death. That aside, no serious poet or writer has failed to address this subject, but none has so skillfully, with such craft and originality of expression, touched upon so many of the far-reaching questions concerning life and death as Shakespeare, in those thirty-three searching lines beginning "To be or not to be."

There are other striking examples of authors who have brought the use of the English language to its highest perfection. Christopher Marlowe is one such example, and his drama leaves little doubt why some critics have argued that the plays we attribute to Shakespeare were in fact written by Marlowe. Marlowe was born in 1564, the same year as Shakespeare, and died in 1593, at the age of twenty-nine. The famous American anthologist, Louis Untermeyer, wrote that Marlowe was "the first to use English speech as though it were a great instrument" and quoted Havelock Ellis as claiming that Marlowe's "'mighty line' is the chief creation of English literary art. . . ."<sup>11</sup> While Marlowe lacks the compass of the greater poet, his use of words often exceeds that of Shakespeare in brilliance and sustained imaginative power. In his play *Doctor Faustus* there is found what I believe to be the most effective and dramatic figure of speech ever composed in the English language.<sup>12</sup>

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And in *Tamburlaine* we find passages that are unsurpassed for their sheer energy and heroic intensity.

If one is indeed captivated by the power and majesty of words, he must surely then be moved by the simple eloquence of our Civil War president. Lincoln's first great speech was given on October 4, 1854, at the state fair in Springfield, in support of the restoration of the Missouri Compromise. He is best remembered, however, for his famous "house divided" speech that was delivered on May 29, 1856, upon his acceptance of the Republican nomination for United States senator; for the address on the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg; and for his Second Inaugural Address, whose closing passage begins with the words "With malice toward none, with charity for all."

Oratory was the rule of the day in Lincoln's era; speeches were ornate, followed set rules, and were often of stupefying length. On the day before Lincoln delivered his speech supporting the restoration of the Missouri Compromise, Senator Stephen A. Douglas thundered for three hours from the same rostrum. One of the most famous orators of his day, Edward Everett spoke for two full hours at Gettysburg. The dedication ceremony had originally been set for October 23, but was delayed a month in order to give Everett time for preparation.

By comparison, Lincoln's speeches, always carefully prepared, were of short duration. The words chosen to convey his thoughts and beliefs are simple and direct. Above all, they convey a deep sincerity and conviction, and are eternally eloquent in the way in which they satisfy to perfection the demands of the occasion on which they were delivered. His few words spoken as a farewell to his friends in Springfield on a cold, rainy morning on February 11, 1861, from the rear platform of the train that was to carry him to Washington as the president-elect—these few words are perhaps unsurpassed for their supreme eloquence, and remain my favorite. They comprise a mere paragraph, which I include in this paper but leave unspoken on grounds that my repetition cannot possibly do them justice.

My Friends:

No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a

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young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.<sup>13</sup>

The richness and varied texture of our native language is remarkable. I have never really learned any foreign tongue well enough to know whether these qualities repeat themselves in other languages, but I believe that the life of Joseph Conrad provides us with some unusual insights on this question. Described by one critic and author as "one of the greatest of English novelists and perhaps the finest prose stylist of them all,"<sup>14</sup> Conrad was a Pole by birth. He left Poland at the age of sixteen and arrived in England five years later. He was then 21 years of age and unable to speak any English whatsoever. He spent the next sixteen years in the British Merchant Navy, retiring as a sailor in 1894. His first novel, which he worked on for five years, was published in 1895. *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Lord Jim*, "Heart of Darkness," *Nostromo*, and other novels and tales were to follow.

My recollection had been that Conrad was fluent not only in Polish, English and French, but perhaps German and Russian as well, and that he had consciously chosen English as the vehicle for his extraordinary talents as a novelist and a storyteller. This recollection, I found, was only partly correct. Conrad was indeed fluent in Polish and had a complete mastery of French, a language which his father had taught him. There is no evidence, however, that he had any working familiarity with German or Russian, nor does the evidence suggest that he deliberately chose English as the language in which he would write. His choice of English appears to have been unconscious, and Conrad himself in one of his letters said that when he wrote the first words of his earliest novel, he had already been *thinking* "for years and years" in English.<sup>15</sup> In the same letter, however, he commented on the "sheer appeal" of the English language, his "quickly awakened love for its prose cadences," and a "subtle and unforeseen accord" of his own emotional nature with the genius of the language. He then went on to conclude as follows:

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"You may take it from me that if I had not known English I wouldn't have written a line for print, in my life."

It is estimated that a thousand years ago, the language which is now English consisted of fewer than 35,000 working words. Today's unabridged dictionary contains nearly one-half million words. Where did all of these words come from? Many were manufactured, as we shall see later, but most poured in from other languages, the main stream being Greek-Latin-French. Many of you will remember how we were encouraged to study Latin in order to better understand English, and while a few of us who studied Latin somehow missed that particular connection, I continue to be amazed by how often a single Latin word has flowered into a long list of English words. The Latin word *carnis*, meaning flesh, is a good example. In one way or another over a long period of time, it has directly or indirectly provided us with the following words: *carnage*, meaning a slaughter; *carnal*, meaning of the flesh; *carnation*, a flower, from its rosy pink color; *carnivorous*, meaning flesh-eating; *charnel*, as in charnel house, a place where corpses or bones of the dead are stored; *incarnadine*, meaning flesh-colored, pink, or red, especially blood-red; *incarnation*, meaning to be made flesh, and *reincarnation*; and finally, the word *carnival*, which refers to the period of feasting and revelry just before Lent and literally means "Flesh, farewell."

Sometime ago it stuck me as amusing how many words and phrases that have entered our language refer to a particular part of the body. You can start with the head and work down, or from the feet and work up; either way, what we discover is something that we might call an "anatomy of words." Hair-raising, winning by a hair's breadth, and splitting hairs are a start. Headlong, heady, hardheaded, headstrong, headroom, and numskull follow.

*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2d ed., defines the word "face" as the front part of the human head and proceeds to give twenty additional meanings of the word. From the features of the face, we have browbeat, eyesore, farsighted, nosy, and cheeky. We pay lip service and can be tight-lipped. That which is pleasing to the taste is toothsome. The Latin word for tongue, incidentally, is *lingua*, from which we get the word "language." Neck and neck is for horses down the stretch, and necking requires no comment. We shoulder burdens and arm ourselves for combat. We want elbow room, a generous amount is handsome, a

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dexterous person is handy, we knuckle down or knuckle under, and small fish are fingerlings.

People can be described as skinflints, spineless, heartless, gutless, cold-blooded, brainy, heels or bums, and are sometimes called other parts of the body. They can go toe-to-toe or head-to-head, see eye-to-eye, stay at arms-length, get a leg up, be without a leg to stand on, get in over their heads, and kick a football. The list is seemingly endless, and I won't add further to it here. The point to be made is that the human body is a prolific source of words and phrases by which we communicate with one another on a daily basis.

Along a somewhat similar line, I have always been astonished by the descriptive power of the phrases and expressions that owe their origin to an agrarian or rural way of life. Many of them manage to convey a simple wisdom, and for lack of a better categorization, they may be referred to as "ruralisms." Some of these expressions are so commonplace—so much a part of our language—that we hardly notice the role they play in everyday conversation. A "stick in the mud," a "wet blanket," and a "bump on a log" all more or less describe the same kind of person. We can be "stumped" or "swamped," get "in a rut" or "get bogged down," or "bark up the wrong tree." Something can be as easy as "falling off a log" or "shooting fish in a barrel." "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," "birds of a feather flock together," "the early bird gets the worm," and we are advised neither to "put all of our eggs in one basket" nor to "count our chickens before they're hatched."

While animals and birds of all kinds have provided us with a storehouse of rural philosophy, the horse seems to have been singled out for special attention. Thus, you may lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. It makes no sense to beat a dead horse, and it's too late to lock the door once the horse is out of the barn. We are admonished not to change horses in midstream, or to look a gift-horse in the mouth. One may encounter a horse of a different color, which is sometimes a dark horse. Nor is that all. An obnoxious person is frequently called a horse's ass, and an outrageous argument or patently false explanation is known by an expletive that is not found in the dictionary and will not be spoken here tonight, at least by me. We view the horse as a farm animal and as an outmoded means of transportation, but if a visitor from a distant world were to drop anchor on this planet, I am

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confident that he would see the horse as a medium through which an entire nation has expressed its collective wisdom. While I am not certain that all of these phrases and sayings are American in origin, they clearly come from a time when man enjoyed a close and harmonious relationship with nature and perhaps paid more attention to its lessons than we do today.

This paper began with Joseph Epstein's question, "What do I live for?" And he mentioned the delights of conversation and reading and writing. Samuel Johnson, whom I also spoke of earlier, would certainly have endorsed this response, and would also look favorably, I am sure, upon our own proceedings. Together with Sir Josuha Reynolds, the English painter, Dr. Johnson was the founder, in 1764, of the most famous literary club in the English-speaking world. "The Club," as it was simply first called, is mentioned frequently in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, and references to this organization may be found elsewhere throughout our literature. A history of the first 150 years of The Club was published in London in 1914,<sup>16</sup> and a copy of this history may be examined in the Special Collections Reading Room of The Newberry Library.

Johnson has been described "as the greatest literary dictator that London ever had."<sup>17</sup> His learning, his wisdom, and his fearlessness in conversation were legendary, and it has been said, with only a hint of exaggeration, that The Club was founded "presumably to hear Johnson talk."<sup>18</sup> It first consisted of only ten members and originally met on Mondays, for supper, at The Turk's Head on Gerrard Street. According to the 1914 history of The Club, it was intended that the original members "should be men of such talents, that if only two of them should meet for the evening, they should be able to entertain each other."<sup>19</sup>

Considering the membership of The Club, there would seem to be no doubt that this intention was carried out. The original ten members, in addition to Johnson and Reynolds, included the British statesman and orator, Edmund Burke, and the playwright Oliver Goldsmith. Boswell and the famous actor and playwright, David Garrick, were elected to membership in 1773, and Edward Gibbon filled the vacancy left by the death of Goldsmith in 1774. Adam Smith became a member in 1775, the year before the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, and Richard Sheridan, the great Irish dramatist, who later became a member of Parliament, was elected in 1777. And on it went. In 1780, one of the



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members of The Club made the following observation: "Of our Club I will only say that there is no branch of human knowledge on which some of our members are not capable of giving information."<sup>20</sup>

The Club was without a title until 1779, when Boswell referred to it as "The Literary Club" at Garrick's funeral. Its membership expanded shortly after its founding and reached forty members in May 1914 with the election of Rudyard Kipling. The proceedings, which always included dinner, were informal and consisted largely of conversation. While there are only scattered references to the subjects discussed, one member recorded the following for the meeting of March 23, 1858: "We discussed the highest period of civilization and I think we gave it to London at the present moment."<sup>21</sup> If this sounds boastful, we need only to remember, in the words of one authority, that "the class which governed Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was almost unique in modern history" and probably finds its only parallel in the class which produced America's Founding Fathers.<sup>22</sup> In addition to those already mentioned, the Club's membership included Sir Walter Scott, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and John Singer Sargent. Lord Macaulay, the English historian and statesman; Lord Acton, one of the greatest historians of the 1800s; Thomas Henry Huxley, the English biologist and writer, who was also the grandfather of Aldous Huxley; Sir Humphrey Davy, scientist; Earl Stanhope, historian; Sir Joseph Hooker, botanist; and Earl Grey, British premier, were also members. On the completion of its first 150 years of existence, The Club could look back on a long list of eminent men who had belonged, including nine Prime Ministers—Liverpool, Canning, Russell, Aberdeen, Gladstone, Salisbury, Rosebery, Balfour and Asquith. A rather remarkable roster indeed, and perhaps a clear affirmation as well of the greatness of that remarkable man of letters, Samuel Johnson.

In closing, I wish to refer to the two words that were adopted by The Club as its motto. I believe that it is appropriate to refer to these words this evening, as I believe that they express our feelings for language and literature and writing and conversation, and for our frequent gatherings to share these common interests. These words, which in Latin are *Esto Perpetua*, were spoken at the meetings of The Club as a toast. In English they mean

"May It Last Forever."

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Epstein, "They Said You Was High Class," in *The Best American Essays: 1987*, ed. Gay Talese (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1987), 98.

<sup>2</sup>The reference here is to the series of papers presented to the Club by Anthony S. Zimmer on his childhood experiences in Kankakee, Illinois. The titles of these papers and the dates on which they were presented are "Progress," April 14, 1980; "Values," October 13, 1980; "Outdoors," January 16, 1984 (also published by the Club in 1984); "Knife," December 16, 1985; and "Out," May 18, 1987.

<sup>3</sup>Robert DeMaria, Jr., *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986) (hereafter referred to as DeMaria). The illustrative quotations included in this paragraph were taken from Mr. DeMaria's book.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Johnson, "Preface to A Dictionary of the English Language," in *Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose*, 3rd ed., ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 248 (hereafter cited as "Preface").

<sup>5</sup>"Preface," 252.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Charles Richardson, *A New Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1839), 1:38 (quoted in DeMaria, 7).

<sup>8</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engel and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. Vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:237-38 (quoted in DeMaria, 3).

<sup>9</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Walden in Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966), 2.

<sup>10</sup>Plato *Phaedo*, trans. Benjamin Jowett in *The Works of Plato*, ed. Irwin Edman (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1928), 141.

<sup>11</sup>Louis Untermeyer, comp. and ed., *A Treasury of Great Poems* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1955), 323.

<sup>12</sup>The reference here is to the words spoken by Faustus to Helen of Troy, upon her being conjured up by Mephistophilis at Faustus' entreaty:

Was this the face that launched a thou-  
sand ships  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

(*Doctor Faustus*, sc. XIII, lines 106-08)

<sup>13</sup>Abraham Lincoln, "Farewell to His Friends at Springfield, Illinois," in *A Treasury of the World's Great Speeches*, ed. Houston Peterson (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1954), 509.

<sup>14</sup>Albert J. Guerard, Introduction to *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*, by

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Joseph Conrad (New York: Buccaneer Books, Inc., 1986), 7.

<sup>15</sup>Conrad to Hugh Walpole, 7 June 1918, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, ed. G. Jean-Aubry (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927), Vol. II, 206.

<sup>16</sup>*Annals of The Club: 1764-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914) (hereafter cited as *Annals*).

<sup>17</sup>*Columbia Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Johnson, Samuel."

<sup>18</sup>Lewis P. Curtis, "Intellectual Aristocracy in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Esto Perpetua: The Club of Dr. Johnson and His Friends, 1764-1784* (Archon Books, 1963), 32 (hereafter cited as Curtis).

<sup>19</sup>*Annals*, 7.

<sup>20</sup>*Annals*, 26.

<sup>21</sup>*Annals*, 72.

<sup>22</sup>Curtis, 13.

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