

AN IMPERSONAL AND OBJECTIVE CRITIQUE OF THE 1982-83 SEASON
OF THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

by
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Presented to the Society and Guests at the Open Meeting on
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Mr. President, Members of the Athenaeum Society, and honored Guests: It is my fixed intention to present to you this evening an impersonal and completely objective critique of the papers presented to the Society this season. I feel uniquely qualified to do this since I have listened with bated breath and avid attention to almost all of them, marveling at what I have heard.

Norman Lazare is our resident literary critic. His analyses of Twain's Huckleberry Finn was another demonstration of his clear thought and analytical style. Norman at least gives the membership a fighting chance by announcing his topic in advance and assigning reading prior to the paper. A few hardy members actually show up and one or two, according to their own testimony, actually read the book. Huckleberry Finn proved to be too ambitious, however. It contains several words of two or more syllables and, according to Norman, an implicit point of view. Now a literary critic would have no raison d'etre without an implicit point of view. He is as constitutionally unable to take a book at its face value as a medical doctor is to speak plain English, and for the same reason. It is in their genes. If Norman were a butcher instead of a critic (assuming there is a difference), I would appreciate his skills just as I do now. He could dismember the carcass of a flea with clean, deft strokes and not even bruise the liver. The greatest thing of all is---he would emerge with 300 pounds of meat. You see it; you marvel at it; you like it; but, upon reflection, you wonder where it all came from.

Now Mark Lowry is a literary critic too, but of a slightly different stripe. He favored us with an analysis of the Song of Solomon, the one portion of the Holy Writ that preachers usually avoid like the bubonic plague---at least, in the pulpit. For those of you who are not dedicated students of the Scriptures, Song of Solomon is to the Bible sort of what the ladies' underwear section is to the Montgomery Ward catalog. Dr. Lowry professed to rely on his own translation from the original Hebrew, going from right to left in good orthodox fashion, but he still was unable to get the sex out of it; he only made it slightly less explicit by giving it the Jimmy Carter treatment, thereby transforming it into lust. Now this may not be wholly fair to Dr. Lowry, whose poetic soul knows no bounds in its romantic nature and love of beauty. Dr. Lowry's nature and academic background have obviously given him a deep appreciation of Solomon's Song, which he shared with a rapt audience. I trust it would not be considered poor taste to suggest the membership just might have been entranced by the spectacle of watching our noble Roman make like a man in his new Sunday shoes picking his way through a lovely cow pasture. Just to set the record straight, he made it---at least until the rebuttal.

Still along the literary vein, Bob Baker regaled the Society on the urgency , of all things, of our developing proficiency in a second language. Talk about carrying coals to Newcastle! Most Americans, as we are well aware, already speak and write a second language and have long been doing so with such regularity that the first is in danger of extinction. "Like, hey man, you know, like, they ain't none no more

and, uh, you know, like, they aren't none left." While local schools and businesses may be called remiss by Baker and Co., fully 40% of our students, in spite of the lack of formal instruction, have developed a high degree of fluency through a respected modern educational technique---peer group tutoring. Of course Bob was touting French, the vernacular of Paris rather than Dirt's Avenue and he did make one strong, convincing point that sticks: there is absolutely no reasonable way of estimating how many sales Kenneth Cayce has missed since he does not now have a French-speaking sales force. That may be the reason he doesn't have many French customers---a phenomenon that has always mildly puzzled me.

Marshall Bassett had the unspeakable misfortune, in the course of his genealogical ramblings, to discover he had Scottish antecedents. Well-mannered people usually don't speak of this sort of thing in public, but the atmosphere of the Athenaeum is so informal and familiar, and Marshall fits in so well, he let it slip in a paper on the history of Scotland. I was appalled. The only thing that ever palled me more was once when, in a fit of misguided idleness, I read a history of Ireland. How any civilized people could have emerged from that wild and craggy land peopled by wild and craggy savages is one of the miracles of modern evolution. Mankind did not learn to be wary of skirts as a result of romantic entanglements with the opposite sex, but as a result of coming into painful contact with club-wielding, haggis-eating, bagpipe-blowing, hairy-legged Scots with a distressing penchant for depopulating their neighborhood. Like Marshall, they make good bankers, too.

One of the ablest members of the Athenaeum in terms of consistently producing papers of high quality and original content is Bob Sivley. You know that his papers are original (occasionally, the ugly rumor spreads that most Athenaeum papers are merely book, or magazine, reports that fail to credit the real author) because who but Bob would seriously propose that the solution to the energy problem in America is the vast reserve of human fat. In a satire worthy of Jonathan Swift, Bob reminded us that fat is simply stored calories, or energy. Therefore, instead of fighting it, we should cherish it as a national asset, encourage its spread, and possibly even subsidize it. Never mind that Bob's clever solution to one serious problem only raises another: how to convert the fat to usable energy without moving the body, he has given us the solution to the weight problem; provided for a substantial reduction of the agricultural surplus; and created a whole new market for diets that add weight. In the process, he also has made a sizable portion of the population happy and stress-free.

Until April 7, 1983, few suspected that Frank Yost, Jack Amis, Sam Traugher, and their ilk are the principal reasons Americans have such a short life span. On that historic date, George Draper, in his quiet, scholarly fashion, proved this to be true beyond reasonable question. The answer to all problems of health and long life is stone ground whole grain flour, which provides roughage, lots of roughage. That's the ticket—roughage—and its concomitant speed. Keep it moving, said George. Let's put it this way: if you are still carrying around tonight's delicious dinner after tomorrow night, you may be in trouble.

The reason for this idle shilly-shallying around in the dark confines of our bowels is white flour, which has had the roughage removed by the dastardly millers and their steel rollers, thereby causing an appendectomal, myocardial, and hemorrhoidal bonanza for the medical profession. This revelation, done with dignity as only George Draper could, should lay to rest forever the unfair charge that the Society never deals with practical, cold hard scientific fact in a practical manner. The last report was that Mr. Yost was planning to have George read this paper at the next meeting of the American Millers Association and hoping to avoid a product liability suit.

The gentle, dulcet tones of Bud Hudson are periodically wafted o'er the halls of the Athenaeum and this season, to the shock of all concerned, his paper had nothing to do with sports---at least of the human variety. Bud, with that fine delicacy for which he is widely known, chose instead to talk about dogs: his neighbor's dogs, and their peculiar evacuation tendencies within his yard. He must have struck a popular chord, because this paper evoked the wildest reaction of the year. It was about evenly divided between confirmation of the widespread neighborhood fertilization projects of the canine persuasion, and scatological jokes pertaining to evacuation. It is said of Norman Mailer's latest book that it is a demonstration of the author's anal fixation. After a due consideration of Bud's and George's papers, the Athenaeum may share this. If you broaden the concept just a little to include other areas and realize that the average age of the Athenaeum membership requires that a session go no more than thirty minutes

without a rest stop, there is no doubt. Most of us identify with Bud's canine writhing in agony as he desperately tries to reach an appropriate spot. Who but Bud could have zeroed in on this frailty so directly? and who could appraise him so accurately as Bob Baker, when he said, "Bud Hudson is full of.....intellectual acuity?"

Jack Amis, having conducted two four-hour seminars on the certainty of Creationism rather than Evolution, favored the Society with a delightful account of his summer labors on a Mississippi River towboat back in the '30s when he was a medical student, which tells us where he learned his surgical techniques. Jack brought that same dedication and enthusiasm to the rivermen that he brought to the book of Genesis. Alexander Campbell once wrote that if Christ ever preached in hell, it would be a short sermon followed by a universal conversion. Jack reversed the procedure at the Athenaeum. Who can fail to share his enthusiasm---with the possible exception of a rough deckhand bound for the whorehouses of Natchez after thirty days on the river, or an Athenaeum member bound for the restroom after an hour of speechifying? Jack's narrative was, as always, compelling and interesting. His sense of detail and ability to paint a word picture are exceptional. That makes it all the more remarkable that he told what everybody else did and said while revealing virtually nothing about himself except that he was glad to get back to shore and to his fancy---or some name sounding like that.

Our resident philosopher is Ben Self. Ben gave us his usual, rational, well-organized presentation, this time dealing with that elusive

will o'the wisp, Happiness. Trying to find weaknesses in one of Ben's papers is like trying to breach the Maginot line. The only successful method of attack is an end run. Like Kilroy of World War II fame, the Greeks were on the ground first in defining Happiness and they discovered, according to Ben, something called the Hedonistic Paradox, namely that Happiness cannot be found by those who are looking for it. Frankly, I have found this to be equally true of Buttons, Keys, Glasses, Income Tax Records, and Ideas for Athenaeum Papers. Apparently there are as many definitions of Happiness as there are people willing to cease pursuing it long enough to try to define it. Knowing Ben, I would say Happiness could be defined as a clean desk, being on schedule, having all theme papers graded, and knowing what Carolyn is going to do next. One thing stood clear in this well-crafted paper: Happiness, like sex, is largely mental, hopefully enduring, and can provide great satisfaction. Epicurus could not have put it better.

Some Athenaeum members give liberal handouts with their papers. The general thought is that you will become absorbed in the handout material and miss the discrepancies in the paper. Also, a handout lends authority to a shaky idea. Bill Edmunds falls in this category, both in relation to the handout and to the shaky idea. This year he dealt with the New Madrid Fault. As if the lack of roughage and the elusive nature of Happiness were not misery enough, we are told we live near the epicenter of an earthquake zone that rivals, maybe even exceeds, the San Andreas Fault in California and earthquake insurance

is either non-existent or nearly worthless. Bill is an earthy character. He likes such subjects and, like Ben, does a competent and thorough job. Or at least I think he does. Somehow he has a predeliction for choosing a topic nobody knows much about, marshaling an impressive array of witnesses, and sailing ahead with the assurance of a man who knows what he is talking about. I think they must teach this in Law School. Like a jury presentation, the impression created outweighs the substance brought to light. For two days after this paper, I worried about the New Madrid Fault. Then, realizing Bill had not given us any satisfactory way of curing or dealing with it, I decided to accept it as another evidence of the inscrutable will of Allah, or Buddha, or Bill.

Now Gladstone Major is another category altogether and by himself. He is a poetic soul, like Mark Lowry---though with a vastly different style, and is a speculator on the future, like Tom Westerfield---again with a vastly different style. His facile pen simply oozes metaphysical phraseology and his mind trips untrammelled through fields scarcely explored and seldom understood. Gladstone is a beansprout man in a meat and potatoes Society, and no one has any more fun mystifying the mob than he. In fact, he may be the only one who has fun during his papers. He invariably holds the Society enthralled in deep meditation. His papers demand thought, and get it. I know this is true as I observe among the membership such subliminal evidences of concentration as: cleaning ones fingernails, picking ones teeth, jiggling the coins in ones pocket, fiddling with ones pipe, and just fiddling. You could fail

completely to understand the language and still know, upon entering the room, that a Major Paper is being read. Turned loose (which is generally regarded as a mistake), the man takes off like a firehorse at the sound of an alarm and is halfway there before the first foot hits the ground. He presents his material in such a calm, delightfully self-deprecatory manner you would think he was making sense---and he is, if you march to the beat of his drummer and have renewed your poetic license.

"Megatrends" has a certain ring to it. It sounds better than "educated guess" and considerably more scientific than "crystal ball." Tom Westerfield is the kind of fellow who makes you think he knows what he is talking about as he casually drops such terms as robotics, microchips, and data bases. It is somehow comforting to feel that somebody knows these things and is in control even if we aren't. Most of us feel like pawns to some mysterious power which, failing to understand, we can only propitiate and hope for the best. For a long time, it was the gods and their priests who determined the course of society; then came the scientific revolution, and sage looking men in nice white lab coats determined what we could and could not do. Now we live in the Information Revolution and the little cathode ray tubes somehow seem to conjure the direction of our collective lives, while those elite who can distinguish between a byte and a flow chart are the new high priests. Personally, I tend to opt for the Horoscope approach. All you have to do is change the terms: the zodiac becomes a flow chart, your birthdate becomes the data base, and the various planets could be designated TR40, Apple II, etc. Thus armed, I am ready for all sorts of Megatrends, like "death and taxes will continue," "the fleas come with the dog," and "when one set of high priests is discredited, another will arise."

Howard Willen watches signs, which makes him kin to Tom Westerfield, but he doesn't always pay attention to them. He gave us a delightful paper which, incidentally, gave him an excuse to attend a meeting. Howard reminds one of the old preacher who was commenting on fine preachers he had heard, and concluded, "When I am wound up, I had just about as soon listen to myself as anyone I have ever heard." And, to tell the truth, I am not disposed to dispute Howard on that. His paper on the signs one sees while travelling hit a familiar note with each of us. When on the road, we tend to notice that in which we are interested at the time--- fences, mailboxes, roofs, or whatever is on our minds. My mother-in-law, who served many years as a postmaster, tended to be especially conscious of snorkel mailboxes. All this is simply to say I am grateful that Howard's paper was not on loose women, gambling rings, drug dens, or wild parties. "Signs" is what we in the Athenaeum call a safe subject. It is very difficult to confute and, much as it pains me to admit it, made a fascinating paper.

Now the only two papers left for complimentary consideration (one scheduled member resigned before delivering his paper) are those which were presented at the January meeting, a meeting which I did not attend. This is no drawback whatever. It may be a distinct advantage. While I had to submit a reason for my absence and secure the Society's stamp of approval, a hurdle of gigantic proportions that taxes the ingenuity of the contrite member and the credulity of the Society, such a minor inconvenience has never disqualified one from intelligently commenting on the papers. I have an excellent precedent. Bob Sivley,

finding himself unable to attend a meeting, simply sent his comments on the papers by one who did attend. They proved to be the most pertinent of the evening. Therefore, I can say without cavil, research, or hesitation that the papers of Duard Thurmond and Charles Tilley were well done, delightfully presented, and that there was a relationship between the two. Duard, a self-made man (nobody ever felt called upon to dispute the dubious honor with him), undoubtedly felt that things are bad, but not as bad as they seem, and will probably get better. Charles, on the other hand, took a serious stand, calling a spade a spade, and a pot a pot. Life for Mr. Thurmond is a TV drama with a happy ending and life, for Mr. Tilley, is a rough road. Tilley's morose point of view, total absence of any sense of humor, and complete inability to recall any apropos stories, was happily offset by Thurmond's occasional frivolity.

So much for a critique of the 1982-83 season of the Athenaeum, of which this evening is the denouement. We have probed together the effusions of fifteen devious, and occasionally dark minds. It has been an above average year, which means below par by any reasonable standard. We have enjoyed a secret edge, which I will share with you in closing. It is this: if you don't have an intelligible paper, provide an eloquent secretary. Future generations, avidly poring over the Minutes of the Athenaeum, will not have the foggiest notion of the dull and semi-literate savagery that really occurred. I have reserved Leslie Crane's services for my obituary, and I recommend you do the same. Thank you.

REBUTTAL

As to George Boone's paper tonight, I thought it was brilliant: a superb climax to the year's program. Honesty compels me to overcome my natural modesty and confess to you that I wrote it. When George stood up to speak, he took the wrong paper, and his natural sense of poise and urbanity led him to go ahead and read the paper he had in hand rather than create a scene. My own unflappable aplomb has led me, whatever the consequences, to do the same.

In case you feel that I may have exaggerated slightly in my evaluation of the papers delivered during the year, let me remind you of one or two excerpts from the Official Minutes provided by our irreproachable Secretary:

"The author traced the genre, the truncated communication, the token humor, and the dubious acumen of these ubiquitous plaques."

"The thesis presented incisive perceptions concerning adipose tissue as a natural resource that could be utilized to generate simple living, reform education, and revolutionize dietary habits."

"The author summarized the classical metaphysical views, the current relevance of correlative interpretations, and the dilemma in contemporary practice of this moral process."

"The author, in poetic cadence, described an insight in human survival that would envision the ultimate cosmos of technical competence and social values...a unified society."