Table Manners

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Origins and anecdotes of the Algonquin Round Table.

At the time this part of its story began, the Algonquin Hotel was already a stylish enclave for the theatrical and literary lights of the day and the center of the cultural universe that was Manhattan. But at the end of WWI, it was about to become the locus of one of the most well-known and enduring literary hallmarks of the 20th century – The Algonquin Round Table, where the behaviors, or manners if you will, of its denizens, did much to set the tone for an age and create a legacy of American wit, wisdom (and literary élan) that resonates to this day.

It started with World War I and ended with the Depression. Traumatic as the war was, few of the men and women destined for the Algonquin Round Table were much troubled by its circumstances. Most were already busy desperately trying to make their careers on Broadway, both in theatre and in writing about the theatre. For those called up, the war held the surface appeal of an elaborate, titillating prank, in part because barely nine months of fighting remained when this particular contingent reached the shores of France and because many of them would never see action.

In particular, three of the Round Table principals, Franklin P Adams, Alexander Woollcott, and Harold Ross worked together in Paris on the Army's magazine, *Stars and Stripes*, and afterwards, through the publications they worked for, served as the primary source for promulgating the lifestyle that the Round Table was to signify.

After the War, much of the world was chronically dazed, as Mark Sullivan put it, and there was an urgency to turn a corner. Writers such as Walter Lippmann, John Dos Passos and Joseph Wood Krutch tried to reason their way out of the moral vacuum of the postwar period. Others illuminated it with their art. There were prominent writers such as Eugene O'Neill, Edna St Vincent Millay, Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken, who would never lunch at the Round Table. But it really didn't matter to the group that referred to itself as the Vicious Circle, and everyone in this small, insular "smart set" was quite all right with serving as court jesters to an anxious kingdom -- to the extent they were even aware.[1]

It was time to make up for lost time. It was a new age of commerce, salesmanship -- and margin buying. Everybody was getting rich and looking for a good time. Edmund Wilson noted "how much freer people were – in their emotion, in their ideas, and in expressing themselves. In the twenties they could love, they could travel, they could stay up late at night, as extravagantly as they pleased; they could think or say or write whatever seemed to them amusing or interesting. There was a good deal of irresponsibility, and a lot of money and energy wasted, and the artistic activities of the time suffered from the general vices, but it was [also] a . . . favorable climate for writing . . . ."[2]

Ready to make the most of it was a young press agent named John Peter Toohey, who was managing the careers of Eugene O'Neill and George S. Kaufman. Woollcott was back at the *Times* as drama critic in 1919, and Toohey prevailed upon a friend of Woollcott's, another publicist named Murdock Pemberton, to arrange a lunch with Woollcott at the Algonquin so that Toohey could promote O'Neill. Woollcott was not impressed, and proceeded instead to go on at length with war stories about <u>himself</u> that invariably began with the phrase, "When I was in the theater of war . . . ."

[1] (Gaines 1977, 17)

[2] (Brendan Gill n.d., xxi)

Toohey and Pemberton then thought of having lunch there again with all the New York theater journalists to send up Woollcott. Ostensibly the occasion was to welcome the "dean of theatre critics" back from the war, but the two publicists set it up to be a well-deserved roast. As Woollcott finished one of his "When I was in the theater of war" stories, Arthur Samuels chimed in with: "If you were ever in the theatre of war, Aleck, it was in the last-row seat nearest the exit." Woollcott could take as well as he could give and regarded it all in good fun, even though most there were quite deferential to his power in their world.

Woollcott loved the attention and wanted to do it again with a select few who were the most fun, or the least threatening, and with whom he could trade quips the best. Among them were: Heywood Broun, Franklin P. Adams, better known as FPA, for the byline he used on his New York Tribune society column named "The Conning Tower;" Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley and Robert Sherwood, who were working for *Vanity Fair*; Harold Ross, the founder of *The New Yorker*; and George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly who collaborated on a number of successful comedies.

At the end of this second luncheon, Toohey, ever the opportunistic publicist, came up with the idea that they do it every day. And so it began. Parenthetically, it was also Toohey, a few years later, who came up with idea to name Harold Ross' new magazine *The New Yorker*.

Frank Case, the genteel manager of the Algonquin, was at first perplexed about the rough, seemingly sophomoric group that would gather impolitely in growing numbers around a regular table, bringing up chairs and squeezing themselves in with little regard for other patrons. On the other hand, he also realized that these up and coming wits drew customers for the sight of the gathering itself. Then as always, their only concern seemed to be their own good company. Herman Mankiewicz dubbed them "the greatest collection of unsalable wit in America."[3]

As much to minimize the disruption they were causing as to capitalize on their growing influence on the popular culture of the time, Case's response was to set up a large, round table in another room, the Rose Room. And thus, serendipitously, without ever expecting it to become what it did, the Algonquin Round Table was underway.

At first the barbs were there for their own delight. When a friend rubbed Marc Connelly's bald head and said it reminded him of his wife's behind, Connelly rubbed his head himself and said, "Why, so it does." Edna Ferber, who was fond of wearing tailored suits, showed up one day for lunch wearing a new suit similar to one Noel Coward was wearing. "Edna," Coward, called out, "you look almost like a man." Ferber replied, without losing a beat, "And so do you, Noel." Speaking out about reviewers who seemed unable to render objective critiques of authors who had won the Nobel Prize, Ferber delighted the group by dismissing them as "awestruck by the Nobelity."[4]

In 1921 there were seventy six legitimate theatres in New York compared to thirty two in 1951 (and maybe half that now). The theatre was a live art, undiluted by Hollywood, radio, or television. Producers put up their own money and dealt with actors directly rather than through their agents. The cost of production was a fraction of what it is now, and the unions were neither

[3] (Gaines 1977, 28)

[4] (Drennan 1995, 152 (most of the quotes will be from this source))

as powerful nor as balky. A play could have a fairly long run of say 200 performances at a satisfactory profit without having to be a smash hit.[5]

Newspapers and magazines were more the source for cultural influence than the radio. Round Tablers wrote for all the major media of the day. Heywood Broun wrote for the *Tribune*, *The World*, the *Telegram*, and the *World-Telegram*. Woollcott wrote for the *New York Times*. Publishers agreed that together these personalities could sell more books than any other commentator before or after, with the possible exception of Walter Winchell a little later in the decade.[6]

There was a premium on youth in those postwar years as well. Editors were hungry for new voices, new viewpoints, anything to keep their publications fresh and up-to-date as the public was anxious to put the gloom of the last decade behind them. In New York, one replacement for the midnight oil and daylight drudge that older writers endured was what Edmund Wilson called the "all-star literary vaudeville" of the Round Table in which one's social efforts counted toward one's working reputation. The system of literary mentor-protégé relationships was highly developed and it was through two of the city's most highly regarded journalists – FPA at the *Tribune* and Frank Crowninshield at *Vanity Fair* -- that most of the young Algonquinites came to enter the life of the literati. In addition, the ability to create laughter seemed to present added possibilities for making "contacts" in both the financial and the cultural fields. The fledglings of the Round Table played that game well.[7]

Crowninshield for all the cache associated with *Vanity Fair*, was a socially conscious taskmaster who referred to his Algonquinite staff as "amazing whelps." It was said of him that he would let his writers say anything -- as long as they said it in evening clothes. At one point he sent out memoranda forbidding employees to discuss salaries, after which Benchley, Parker and Sherwood took to wearing placards around their necks bearing that information. When they were late, employees had to fill out tardy slips explaining why. Benchley filled both sides of one such slip with a story about how the Hippodrome elephants had got loose and how he, heroically, had tried to turn them back, which involved scampering after them as they trooped around the Plaza Hotel and down to the Hudson docks, making him – drat the luck! – eleven minutes late. [8]

These young talents were gaining national reputations. FPA's widely popular column was an increasingly hip source for the goings-on of these new sophisticates and had a national following. Woollcott's flamboyant reputation as king of the drama critics was paramount. Kaufman and Connelly were making it as playwrights and had their eyes more on commercial success than artistic success. They set out to show up the conventions and crazes of middle class America for a fraud, they snookered the careerists, and showed virtue to be tool of hypocrites. However, their audience was no Lost Generation but rather the people who could afford tickets. And they always let their targets get away clean at the end. It was Kaufman who coined the line, "If you have a message, call for Western Union," as well as "Satire is something that closes on Saturday night." High art was not on the agenda.

[5] (Harriman 1951, 40)
[6] (Harriman 1951, 76)
[7] (Gaines 1977, 34-36)
[8] (Harriman 1951)

Aside from their own budding literary distinctions, the Round Tablers consequently played a secondary role, as Mark Van Doren noted, which was "to retail the gossip, promulgate the jests, discuss the personalities, and represent the manners of New York. [They were] the licensed jesters of the town," and they wrote of nothing more often than, or better than, of themselves. Their success lay in their ability to convey a sense of "in-ness" to their readers, an inside line to the new sophistication. And so the Round Table essentially provided each other an ongoing source of copy.[9]

Here's a clip from FPA's Saturday column, *The Diary of Our Own Samuel Pepys*, that captures both his unique literary style as well as the typical goings on that went out to his broad readership:

> So to the baseball game with D. Stewart . . . thence to G. Kaufman's, and played cards, and lost so little that H. Ross said it was a moral victory . . . So to H. Broun's, where a great party and merry as can be, and we acted a play, J. Toohey being the most comickal (sic) of all; but I loved Mistress Dorothy Parker the best of any of them, and loathe to leave her, which I did not do until near five in the morning . . . then after to R. Sherwood's to play cards, and an amusing game we had of it . . . and so to F. Case's, and as merry an evening as I ever had, and Rob Benchley come in to watch and did most comickal anticks as I ever saw in my life, what with imitating a cyclone and a headwaiter . . . Saw too Miss Mary Pickford . . . And in came D. Fairbanks . . . and so to dinner with R. Benchley and Mistress Dorothy . . . and I fell in love with Miss Helen Hayes for a few minutes, and so home, at near four in the morning. But I made a vow that I shall go to bed early forever after this.

As was the case nationally, prohibition seemed to create only more opportunities for alcohol abuse, which for the Round Tablers only whetted their already cutting personalities. It's hard to say how things might have turned out if they all weren't so focused on getting access to booze. If their days started at the Gonk, they often ended in booze-flushed apartments and elegant midtown speakeasies, such as Tony Soma's.

A star-gazing, social climbing magazine illustrator named Neysa McMein, who lived across the hall from Dorothy Parker, became part of the growing field, by way of FPA again, and held an open salon to all her friends where they often met in the hours before and after theatre engagements. An unusual hostess, she often spent her time at the gatherings painting portraits of the group and usually just engaged them when they arrived and when they left with her paint brush in her teeth and gestures of disheveled politeness. The crowning attraction, however, was Neysa's bathtub gin, a renowned mixture, they say, of grain alcohol, glycerin, distilled water and oils of lemon and coriander. At any given time, in addition to the many increasingly prominent Tablers, it would not be unusual to find budding talents such as Jascha Heifetz, Irving Berlin, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and more. Evidently Gershwin performed his "Rhapsody in Blue" at Neysa's prior to its Broadway debut.

They were glorying in their celebrity. This was their decade now, there for them and them alone. Disconnected as it was from reality, united in a common albeit neurotic, self-destructive bond,

[9] (Gaines 1977, 47)

and benefiting from the confluence of a like and caustic sense of humor, they worked each other over and into the many incidents that ultimately became their legend.

Adams was regarded as the "father" so to speak of the Round Table for his many introductions, but the caustic, imperious and temperamental Alexander Woollcott remained the center of the group and set the tone if only because, despite his arrogance and generally dismissive ways, he was the most social -- and the most socially ambitious -- in their general regard. But he was reviled as much as revered because of his often offensive ways. Marc Connelly said that "rancor was [his] only form of exercise." On being asked to describe Woollcott in one word, Kaufman thought for a moment and answered, "Improbable." Thurber referred to him as "Old Vitriol and Violets." And when Woollcott, gloating over his first book said "Ah, what is so rare as a Woollcott first edition?" FPA replied, "A Woollcott second edition."

When approached by a former classmate at a college reunion, Woollcott replied "I can't remember your name, but don't tell me." In response to his meanness even to his closest friends, he remarked, "My friends will tell you that Woollcott is a nasty old snipe. Don't believe them. Woollcott's friends are a pack of simps who move their lips when they read." When he informed a friend that he was going to stay at the friend's house for a few days, the friend remarked with some hesitation at the prospect, "That will be swell," whereupon Woollcott replied, "I'll be the judge of that." He thought Harold Ross looked like "a dishonest Abe Lincoln." In a backhanded defense of his friend Michael Arlen, he said "Arlen, for all his reputation, is not a bounder. He is every other inch a gentleman." A few of his more famous quips include "A broker is a man who runs your fortune into a shoestring," and "All the things I really like to do are either immoral, illegal, or fattening." On a local note, we can add the following: "The people of Germany are just as responsible for Hitler as the people of Chicago are for the Chicago Tribune." He could also be endearingly gracious and caring and remained a constant in the lives of the Vicious Circle as many of them drifted apart.

Benchley had a droll, off-beat sense of humor that historians have credited as setting the tempo for modern comics. As the Round Tablers got into their full swing, they decided to stage a revue for their friends, titled *No Sirree*, during which Benchley delivered what became probably his signature sketch, *The Treasurer's Report*. After the performance, Irving Berlin asked him to begin performing the sketch in his *Music Box Revue*. Benchley was incredulous. He hadn't even written it down. As a joke, he asked for $500 a week, a very high sum at the time -- about $6,000 in today's currency -- and Berlin agreed.

Benchley was married with two children and living in Scarsdale. At first he was a tee-totaler, a model family man, and something of a prude. Life in the fast lane, his close friendship with Dorothy Parker especially, who was decidedly not a tee-totaler, and their many after-hours forays over to Tony Soma's speakeasy took a depressing toll. As the days and nights went on, he spent more and more of his time in the city, continued drinking more and more heavily, had several affairs, and wound up with a room and a regular account, if you will, at Polly Adler's brothel. He spent every last dime and then some of the $500 a week he received for his performance at the *Music Box Revue*, and wound up deeply in debt at the end of its 9-month run. Self-deprecating to a fault, he led a surprisingly dissipated life and died an alcoholic, but he did leave us with some very good lines.

- When he arrived in Venice for a summer vacation, he immediately wired a friend with this message: Streets flooded. Please advise.
- On matters of personal finance, he quipped: The advantage of keeping family accounts is clear. If you do not keep them, you are uneasily aware of the fact that you are spending more than you are earning. If do keep them, you know it.
- In commenting on his writing success, he said, "It took me fifteen years to discover that I had no talent for writing, but I couldn't give it up because by that time I was too famous."
- On the death of a Hollywood movie queen whose sensational love life had been highly publicized, Benchley's suggested epitaph was: "She sleeps alone at last."
- As a drama critic, he ran a string of negative observations over time on what he thought was an awful play called Abie's Irish Rose, which nevertheless was wildly popular. The series of comments ran along lines like this:
    - People laugh at this every night, which explains why democracy can never be a success.
    - In another two or three years, we'll have this play driven out of town.
    - Where do people come from who keep this going? You don't see them out in the daytime.
    - And along about the middle of the show's run, "We might as well say it now as later. We don't like this play. And finally, with characteristic sarcasm,
    - We were fooling all the time. It's a great show.
- After several suicide attempts by a young female artist in the group -- or by some accounts, Dorothy Parker's first suicide attempt -- Benchley advised her to go easy on the suicide stuff as it was likely to ruin her health
- Arriving home on a rainy night, he told his wife he needed to get out of his wet clothes and into a dry martini.
- In America, he observed, there are two classes of travel – first class and with children.
- In describing an exchange with a notable but intimidating figure, he concluded: Drawing on my fine command of the English language, I said nothing.
- He observed that the freelance writer is a man who is paid per piece or per word or perhaps.[10]

The main attraction, though, far and away, was Dorothy Parker. Parker was born Dorothy Rothschild (in 1893) of a Jewish father and Christian mother, who died when Dorothy was five.

[10] (Drennan 1995)

She grew up on the upper west side of Manhattan and attended a Roman Catholic school but was asked to leave after she referred to the Immaculate Conception as "spontaneous combustion." She later went to a finishing school in Morristown, New Jersey, but her formal education ended when she was thirteen.

Following her father's death in 1913 she played piano at a dancing school to earn a living while she worked on her verse. She sold her first poem to Vanity Fair in 1914 and then landed a job as a staff writer for *Vogue*. She moved to *Vanity Fair*, another Conde Nast publication, as a staff writer in 1916. In 1917 she married a Wall Street broker named Edwin Pond Parker, who was shortly called up into the Army. He came back with a number of serious addictions and ultimately the marriage fell apart. From that time forward, though, she was known among her friends as Mrs. Parker, even after marrying again.

She was always ambivalent about her (half) Jewish heritage, particularly given the strong anti-Semitism of that era, and joked that she only married to escape her name. One day at lunch when Kaufman took offense at one of Woollcott's racist remarks, he arose from the table and declared: "This is the last time that I shall tolerate any slur upon my race at this table. I am now walking away from this table, out of this dining room, and out of this hotel" He then looked around the table, saw Dorothy, and added: "And I hope that Mrs. Parker will walk out with me – half way." She had a very unhappy childhood and hated both her father and her stepmother, refusing to refer to her as either mother or stepmother, preferring instead to call her "the housekeeper."[11]

On the other hand, she was pretty and demure, with a unique voice and speech pattern that endeared her to her friends. Her self-deprecating charm surfaces in a comment on her own writing, whereby she said, "I'd like to have money. And I'd like to be a good writer. These two can come together, and I hope they will, but if that's too adorable, I'd rather have money." She had a devastating, cutting wit that grew out of numerous failed marriages and affairs (she once said she liked her men handsome, ruthless and stupid), along with several suicide attempts and chronic alcoholism. Brendan Gill observed that her knack for causing things to end badly, amounted, in her friends' eyes, to genius, and one cannot help thinking with sympathy of the miserable days and nights through which she drove a succession of distracted lovers.[12]

Her lunch-time barbs, quips and short verses were picked up by Woollcott in the *Times*, FPA in *The Conning Tower*, and later by Ross in *The New Yorker*, developing along the way what became her national reputation as a wit. Woollcott described her as "a combination of Little Nell and Lady Macbeth." She published her first volume of verse in 1926, which sold 47,000 copies and was praised widely. Typical of the acclaim was a review in *The Nation* that found it "caked with a salty humor, rough with splinters of disillusion, and tarred with a bright black authenticity."[13]

In the midst of a long standing feud with Clare Booth Luce, whom she considered an insufferably pompous fraud, they ran into each other entering a building. "Age before beauty," said Luce, dripping with disdain; "Pearls before swine," Parker responded, as she swept through the door before her. Told that Luce was kind to her inferiors, Parker asked, "And where does she

[11] (Wik)
[12] (Brendan Gill n.d., xxvii)
[13] (Meade 1989)

find them?" She described Basil Rathbone as "Two profiles pasted together." At one of the Algonquin luncheons, a female author was congratulating herself on the success of her marriage to someone the Tablers considered a crushing bore. "I've kept him for seven years," the author concluded with pride, at which time Parker chimed in, "Don't worry, my dear, if you keep him long enough he'll come back in style."

Her own circumstances with men prompted dismissive turns of romantic phrase. Reporting on a Yale prom, she said, "If all those sweet young things present were laid end to end, I wouldn't be at all surprised." Describing a guest at one of her own parties, she said "That woman speaks eighteen languages and can't say 'No' in any of them." When informed that a female acquaintance had broken a leg while vacationing in London, Parker concluded that she probably did so by "sliding down a barrister."

Conversely, she was not above recognizing her own faults along these lines. Asked about a party she had attended, she said, "One more drink and I would have been under the table; two more drinks and I would have been under the host." Arriving late to a party, the host said the guests were ducking for apples. Parker's response was, "There, but for a typographical error, is the story of my life." On being shown a lush apartment by a real estate agent, she observed, "Oh dear, that's much too big. All I need is room enough to lay my hat and a few friends." Discussing a job with a prospective employer, Mrs. Parker explained, "Salary is not an object; I want only enough to keep body and soul apart." At the reception following her re-marriage to Alan Campbell, she said, "People who haven't talked to each other in years are on speaking terms again today – including the bride and groom."

Her reviews were often devastating. Because plays were so prominent in New York at the time, many were pretty bad. As a theatre critic, Parker was hard pressed to suffer them gladly. In describing a performance by Katherine Hepburn no less, she wrote "She ran the whole gamut of emotions from A to B." She dismissed some novels expeditiously: "This book must be a gift book -- that is to say, a book which you wouldn't take on any other terms." Elsewhere she wrote, "This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force." Of the play House Beautiful, Mrs. Parker commented: "*The House Beautiful* is the play lousy." About the state of modern fiction at the time, she noted, "A list of our authors who have made themselves most beloved and, therefore, most comfortable financially, shows that it is our national joy to mistake for the first rate, the fecund rate." She also wrote book reviews for *The New Yorker* under the name "The Constant Reader." During that time she had to review a book by A S Milne, whose child-like, baby-talk language she found particularly cloying. She ended the review famously with the comment, "At that point Tonstant Weader Fwowed up."

The Round Tablers also loved to play word games. One of their favorites was to use a word in a sentence. Parker is maybe most famous for one of two lines. The first being "Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses," and the other being her response to a challenge to use the word "horticulture" in a sentence. And I'm wagering that this one is well known here tonight as well. So I will turn to the audience for that reply – Can you give me a sentence with the word, horticulture? [You can lead a whore to culture but you can't make her think.]

Parker and several others in the group became quite famous and wealthy. Even so, there developed a feeling among all but maybe Sherwood that they had sold out. As their careers began to take them in different directions, they drifted apart and ultimately became quite bitter

about each other and about the fame that accrued to them because of the Round Table. Parker actually discounted many of the stories about her and about them. "These were no giants," she said many years later. "Think who was writing in those days – Lardner, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway. Those were the real giants. The Round Table was just a lot of people telling jokes and telling each other how good they were. Just a bunch of loudmouths showing off, saving their gags for days, waiting for a chance to spring them . . . . It was the terrible day of the wisecrack."[14]

None of them wrote any significant memoirs about their time at the Algonquin and some dismissed the fame that attended them in those years. Parker and Benchley in particular, perhaps the most gifted of the Algonquin wits, ended up with desolate lives. Benchley lived through a moribund marriage and died of complications from cirrhosis of the liver. Parker died in lonely, alcoholic obscurity. The titles of her books amounted to a capsule autobiography: Enough Rope, Sunset Gun, Laments for the Living, Death and Taxes, After Such Pleasures, Not So Deep as a Well, Here Lies. With a single exception, the titles all speak directly or indirectly of death.[15] At the time of her death in 1967, most people had thought she was already dead. Her ashes remained unclaimed for 17 years.

But in that particular time, those ten years or so between World War I and the Great Depression, theirs was a shining light unlike anything before or since. Edna St. Vincent Millay was a peripheral figure at the time, sometimes with them sometimes not, and seems to have written a fitting epitaph for this passing glory:

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends–
It gives a lovely light!

[14] (Hermann 1982, 85)
[15] (Brendan Gill n.d., xxvi)

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