

# THE TRICORN

NEWSLETTER published jointly by the BOSTON +  
LONG ISLAND + PHILADELPHIA GREAT BOOKS COUNCILS

NOVEMBER, 1979

## Socrates and the Great Books Jury

Our lead article in the August Tricorn, "Socrates: Innocent Or Guilty?" brought a heated response from our Great Books readers. The article, excerpted from a lengthy "self-interview" piece in the New York Times Magazine by noted journalist and Greek scholar I.F. Stone, created an emotional stir among both critics and defenders of Socrates. We don't have space for all the letters received, but here are three somewhat typical of the response:

Mary V. Lauro, Bronx, New York, writes: "The condensation of I.F. Stone's self-interview in the New York Times concerning Socrates' famous trial, was both interesting and puzzling. Stone attempted to show that Socrates (and also Plato) was anti-democracy; that the overthrow of the Athenian democracy by the Thirty Tyrants led by Critias, a student of Socrates for a brief time, was a result of Socrates' teachings; and that therefore the Athenians, reestablishing their democracy, were justified in trying and condemning Socrates.

"Aside from gross errors in both logic and history, what is most puzzling about the self-interview is that Stone presents known knowledge and theories as if they were hatched from his own studies. For example, the world has long known that Socrates and Plato thought democracy silly (they thought tyranny, oligarchy and plutocracy worse). So did Aristotle, Aristophanes and many others. Indeed, Plato was more a communist (viz. The Republic) than an aristocrat.

"Any reader of Plato's Apology (Socrates' trial) will be able to correct several of Stone's errors: 1) Stone says there is no mention in the Apology of anti-democratic revolution and subsequent rule by the Tyrants. There is. 2) He says the accuser of Socrates is never named. Three are named, along with the groups they represent. 3) He says Plato depicted Socrates' trial as 'democracy against tyranny and political revenge.' He didn't. A while later Stone says Plato wanted to show the 'failures of justice and democracy when placed in the hands of the people or their elected representatives.' Aside from the fact that he didn't, in who else's hands should democracy be placed?

"In view of these glaring errors, I hope that the "tiny nest of virgin facts" which Stone claims to have uncovered will yield more than another egg."

Another reader (name withheld by request) writes: "I will not attempt to defend Socrates or the writings of Plato because I believe they need no defense. But I would like to point out some inconsistencies, omissions and incorrect statements included in the attacks on Socrates.

"The first five paragraphs of the I.F. Stone article state that Stone uncovered virgin facts about Socrates. I found nothing factual in the Stone article that doesn't appear in the Encyclopedia Britannica (1956 Ed., Vol. 20, pp 915-920). The difference is solely in emphasis and interpretation. I contend that the Stone article borders on sensationalism.

"The article as quoted in the Tricorn bases much of its case on the relationship among Socrates, Critias and Alcibiades. It omits the fact that Socrates disobeyed Critias at the risk of his life. The Stone article states, 'Plato never mentions Critias nor even the very recent antidemocratic revolution and the rule of the tyrants.' I refer you to the original Great Books edition of the Apology (pp. 19-20), where he describes the incident mentioned above. He does not use the name of Critias, but he talks of the 'oligarchy of the Thirty.'

"Stone calls Critias and Alcibiades 'the two most famous pupils of Socrates.' What happened to Plato? Stone calls Socrates 'an elitist.' Nietzsche says 'Socrates was plebs.' Please, gentlemen, who is right?

"But this nit-picking has no bearing on our discussing The Apology in the Great Books program. In our program we do not sit in judgment of Plato or Socrates, but rather of the ideas expressed. And whether Socrates was the teacher or friend of two no-goodniks like Critias and Alcibiades is unimportant. The concepts expressed in Plato's writings are what we should be concerned with, such as:

"'For the fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretence of knowing the unknown; . . . I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil . . . Men of Athens, I love and honour you; but I shall obey God rather than you.' (p. 16, The Apology). Again, his profound statement: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

"His personal life (about which I cannot judge since I was not there) neither validates nor invalidates the ideas expressed in Plato's writings, any more than the fact Jefferson owned slaves invalidates the Declaration of Independence.

"I would like to quote from page 2 of the old green 'Guide for Leaders of Great Books Discussion Groups': ' . . . that there is a common core of problems that have occupied all men, in all places and in all ages, and that the discussion of these problems throughout history is a "Conversation" which is reproduced best in the great books. These books represent our tradition, our civilization, and some of the finest attempts made to state the basic questions of human existence and to answer them."

Emil Bix of Philadelphia, however, comes to the defense of Stone's article. Here are his comments:

"Now that we have seen Socrates condemned by I.F. Stone's historical research, we can add even stronger proof of his guilt without straying from our Great Books readings. Socrates side-steps the charges -- stated only in his words in Plato's Apology -- because he sees himself as a stand in for philosophy on trial, and because he despairs of his cause in a political forum.

"The most detailed case against philosophy is made by Aristophanes in Clouds, where it is ridiculed because it must be taught in face-to-face dialogue and so benefits only a wealthy elite; also because its teachings would supplant faith in the gods with 'unjust logic.' Aristophanes implies that the failure of philosophy to set standards of belief in nature must lead to vice; that the poet has a better understanding of the citizenry's concerns; that poetry does a better job of bringing a moral message to a large audience; and that comedy can tackle controversial themes more gracefully.

"Plato, friend and follower of Socrates, is hit so hard by these allegations that in his Symposium, an imagined encounter of playwright, politico, physician and others, he takes revenge by inventing a funnier speech for Aristophanes than any the master humorist himself could compose. Moreover, Aristophanes turns up as the fourth of seven speakers to place him in the center of the argument.

"Philosophy, now on the brink of defeat, may well account for Plato's anger, noted by Socrates in The Apology; let alone the tricky tactics the old sage employs in his defense against what he terms accusations of impiety and corrupting the young. Any charges he may be said to refute were leveled earlier by Aristophanes rather than in open court.

"Socrates' supercilious 'I do not know' sets the tone for starters. He soon stoops to asserting his staunch belief in the divinities and the oracle, after a lifetime of trying to prove it wrong. In a remarkable role reversal he likens himself to a god-given gadfly, a divine, regenerative and redemptive force to spur the racehorse-like Athenians whom he then tries to put on trial. Their outrage at Socrates' arrogant self-portrayal as the savior of Athens leads 281 of the 501 assembled politicians, generals, artists and craftsmen -- partners all in successful statesmanship -- to vote his conviction. His second speech singles out this segment to grant a lesser sentence, in a plea to act on Socratic notions of what is 'good' rather than lawful.

"Socrates finally asks his remnant of followers to retain their belief in the third speech, never understood by the loyal Crito. Neither philosopher nor pious disciple of Aeschylean deities, this humble champion of righteous honor is a wayward victim of Socratic corruption through uncertainty and skepticism. Robbed of Homeric myths and traditions, the soon-to-be leaderless Crito's need for values is accompanied by Socrates' stern injunction to heed the conventional laws in place of 'higher' justice. Plato interprets for us the Socratic legacy of doubt that the lofty peaks of philosophy can ever be scaled by the many; that it is radically private and publicly indefensible."

### Colby Revisited

The Colby experience always fuels the spirit to soar for most. And for some, this spirit in rhapsodic flight finds expression in words that are passed on to us. The first comes from Jean Sudhalter of West Newton, Mass.:

"It is my conviction that the Great Books program is often misunderstood by many who, once experiencing it, would love and be deeply enriched by it.

"Once immersed, we learn that Great Books is not comprised of egg-heads who read dry, boring material and then attend a kind of school session where they are tested to see if they comprehend what they read and meet an intellectual standard. The experience teaches us that Great Bookers are people from diverse backgrounds and varying educations who are imbued with intellectual curiosity and love of discussion -- and who meet primarily for communication.

"I've found that Great Bookers are known by one another more intimately and honestly than are many of their own family and friends. This springs not from intellectual exchange but from something deeper: an openness of heart and mind and spirit that jells into something almost akin to love among them.

"Thus, 'discussions' are misnamed. They are more truly spirited debates, convictions, sincere expressions of viewpoints and ideas. And when these are focused on a common center, each candle contributes to a bright beam of light that penetrates to the core of the reading and the ideas under discussion.

"It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to fully express the euphoria one experiences during and after a deep-felt discussion directed to a common center. We all know that certain drugs or hallucinogens are taken by some to heighten perceptions and insights and to inspire moments of ecstasy. But Great Books does this for us in a 'purer' sense -- does it better and with more lasting effect."

And this from poetess Marianne Andrea, a member of Group 2 (the Sahibs) at Colby last August:

### L'ENVOI

The mental mathematics of the Sahib tribe  
Provide equations to resolve the learned scribes:  
Thrashing within the seas of friendship a measurement  
Unconquered and untamed;  
Grasping the raft in rougher waters  
To locate the compass of equality and love . . .  
Seeking salvation for themselves,  
The Sahibs find below - (perchance above)  
Another three, locked in eternity.  
An entrance - YES!  
But exit - none to find  
As they defy and thrash still further  
In a hotter clime;  
Until a freshness falls as from a bending bough,  
And we embrace the universe in "I and Thou".  
Perceiving "IT", then magic "IT" to YOU:  
And you find essence after essence to renew.  
Until the sea surrounds the Sahibs - brave,  
Another world unfurls its flag -  
In which Britannia rules the waves.

Patterns merge, divide, the races face  
Each other's eyes and crises rage.  
Man versus man, interactions wage  
A universal war - a precious world gone wild!  
And we are faced with the autistic child!  
Tears do not show,  
For each withholds the terror thought,  
Oh Lord! What hast Thou wrought?  
Move mosques or mountains, men or seas -  
But let the child be free!  
Then just as Sahibs fly as weary birds  
And perch on limbs of autumn's tree,  
Across horizons blazon words  
Redeemed at last - by Emily,  
The last of our company.

-----  
"Tis this - invites - appalls - endows -  
Flits - glimmers - proves - dissolves -  
Returns - suggests - convicts - enchants -  
Then - flings in Paradise."

## The Ten Commandments of Great Books Discussion Groups.

A Great Books discussion is an activity with certain arbitrary conventions just as golf, bridge or scrabble have. A participant is there by choice and, in making the choice to participate, assumes tacit acceptance of the conventions. To reject the conventions is anyone's choice. But then Great Books discussions should not be participated in any more than one would insist on clubs ranking higher than spades in a bridge game. If you wish that, go play some other game.

These, then, may be considered the Ten Commandments of Great Books discussion groups:

- 1) Thou shalt come to a discussion group to exchange ideas, not to find a convenient forum for expounding thine own preconceived opinions.

This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it:

- 2) Thou shalt read the book and take part in the discussion in a quest for wisdom, not a quest for confirmation of preconception.
- 3) Thou shalt confine thy comments to the book or to what thou are certain is common knowledge, rather than flaunt thy expertise on esoteric subjects.
- 4) Thou shalt not introduce personal anecdotes unless they are very short and very pertinent.
- 5) Thou shalt listen to the other participants, not put in thy time impatiently waiting for them to finish so thou may expound.
- 6) Thou shalt continue in the development of an interesting point someone else introduces rather than divert the thread of discussion to thine own fixation.
- 7) Thou shalt not rely upon volume of sound and velocity of words as a substitute for coherence and content.
- 8) Thou shalt not drag in outside authority nor historical references which other participants may not know in order to evade discussion of the idea at hand.
- 9) Thou shalt read the book carefully if thou wish to speak.
- 10) Thou shalt be prepared to treat all with the courtesy thou wouldst wish for thyself and to laugh not only at others but also at thyself.

Bill Baker

### Revisions and Updating of the Great Books

Philadelphia's Henry Cohen expresses the following views concerning the current state of the Great Books sets available for discussions:

"Revision is a loaded word when linked to Great Books. The hackles of the traditionalists rise when they hear it, since they take it to mean the recent publication of the all-literature series (Search For Meaning, etc.). But Great Books revision has customarily meant the re-valuation and shifting about of titles in the classics series. Some years ago the Foundation revised, in that fashion, the first five classics series. Their grant ran out before they could revise the last four series to finish the job. Since then, their only revising has been to telescope or reduce the original nine years into the present four.

There is another sort of revision that many old hands would like to see: an updating of classics titles to include important 20th century thinkers. Two years ago, Mortimer Adler suggested a list of non-fiction and fiction works from the first half of this century. One or more new series based on these suggestions would be a valuable addition to the Great Books program.

But where would the funds come from? Chicago might have a good chance of securing a grant if matching funds were raised by a cooperative effort of Great Books Councils around the country. I'd like to have some response to this suggestion."

Tricorn Editor Bill Rossi would like to add his own personal comment on this matter:

The Great Books program is sinking in the quicksand of jeopardy. The reasons are simple and clear. The Great Books Foundation has run out of advanced classics series readings to provide the necessary continuity to participating groups and the program. Great Books has now been reduced to a four-year "course." Beyond that, the Foundation offers little else except its readings for Junior groups and, in my opinion, an aborted and futile effort to stimulate adult continuity and sustained interest via its "modern" series (Search For Meaning, etc.) -- in my view, an outright default of the original Great Books concept.

After a group has completed the first four series or years, where does or can it go? Over the past two years this question and challenge has been posed to the Foundation and the Councils. No viable answers have come from any of these sources. Rather, the whole thing has been repeatedly swept under the rug. Soon the bugs will eat through the rug and there will be no place to sweep them.

Yes, glib answers have been forthcoming. For example, let each group make up its own "advanced" list of readings (beyond the 4th series). That's sheer evasion. A group is a participatory recipient, not a creator or innovator, of a Great Books program. The group leader has his hands full leading and cementing the group. Providing a list of advanced readings, plus making them available, is the responsibility of the Councils -- and they have completely defaulted on this score.

But even the provision of a list of advanced series readings resolves little. Who will make the selections from the longer readings (as traditionally done by the Foundation)? The full-length readings of some or most of the classics would likely discourage much of the group participation.

Again, even if the new lists, including the selections from the books, were provided, how will the books be obtained? Remember, you're buying the whole book, not a portion of it. Even at discount prices a set of 16 readings might run \$30 to \$40, as compared with the Foundation's standard \$14.

How and where would a reserve stock of such book sets be maintained, quickly available in sets on demand, as with the Foundation? Who would fund such a stock?

Unless the Councils confront these matters head-on, the continuity of the Great Books program and groups beyond the fourth year is threatened with disintegration. It is, I believe, self-delusory to assume that a full-fledged Great Books program can function, regionally or beyond, primarily on the basis of a couple of one-day "institutes" a year, plus Colby.

These are fine as Great Books supplements. But they do not comprise the Great Books program -- the year-to-year continuity over the long term is the true breath of life of the Great Books concept.

If the Great Books program is to have a viable, exciting future, then it must have the on-going fresh flow of a river and not stagnate into a murky pool. The reality must be faced, and damn the further procrastination. We can no longer rely on the Foundation to provide the solution. The fate of the Great Books program is now in the councils' own hands to mold or to allow to become moulded.

### Council News

#### Philadelphia:

**Open house:** Instead of holding its usual five or six neighborhood mini-institutes, the Philadelphia Council decided this year to give each group the option of having its own sample discussion or open house. Materials were sent to each leader, including posters, copies of 'The City Coat of Arms' by Kafka, sample press releases, rules for discussion, group lists and readings lists. It was made easy for people to come, since meetings were no farther than their neighborhood library or community center. All those groups with anemic memberships were encouraged to take part.

Postcards were subsequently sent to leaders, asking for results. Not all responses are in yet, but on the basis of those received, most groups chose to have an open house, inviting the local public to their regularly scheduled meeting. The Andorra Library group held a sample discussion that attracted 13 new people, four of whom bought books that night. Not all sample groups were that successful, but most did attract some new people, as did the open house formats. Iz Wachs, Emil Bix and Bill McConeghey formed the hard-working committee for the project.

#### Long Island:

**Demonstration discussion:** On September 12, the Long Island Council sponsored a mini-demonstration and discussion at the Commack Library. About 40 people attended, including prospective members from Commack and nearby areas, plus librarians interested in starting groups in their own libraries. Advance publicity was sent to various libraries. Those attending the event were given literature plus the readings lists of the Great Books program.

The demonstration group, composed of experienced Council members, discussed an excerpt from Ortega y Gasset's works. The audience response was excellent. There will be about 30 people joining the new Commack Library Great Books group. Another contingent from Brentwood will begin a group in their library. As starting leaders, Dan Kohn will lead in Commack, Chuck Ferrara in Brentwood. A leader training session for Suffolk will be offered to help prepare participants to assume leadership for these and other new groups to be formed.

---

**Tricorn Editor:** Bill Rossi  
63 Highland Avenue  
Cohasset, Mass. 02025

**Regional Correspondents:**  
Norma Oser, Philadelphia  
Sylvia Soderberg, Boston  
June Ferrara, Long Island

Two Poems

The following two poems were submitted by Peg Mahoney, a long-time Great Booker from Quincy, Mass. Several of her fine poems have been published.

Social Obligation

The odor of opulence  
clings to the drapes  
overpowering the pine-scented candle

Waterford sparkles  
on a lemon-waxed hutch  
with no fingerprints on the handle

Powdered cocktails are served  
from a chilled sterling tray  
with napkins that match the decor

Small-talk smog  
mingles with custom-blend smoke  
and settles on plush Persian floors

Cum laude portraits  
guard tasteful antiques  
arranged to discourage discussion

Pallid Muzak oozes  
from discreetly-toned tapes  
low trebled to deaden percussion

Limp glove goodbyes  
at handcarved oak doors  
with veneered congeniality

A quarantine sign  
should warn all guests:  
AN ADVANCE CASE OF FORMALITY.

---

A P.O.W.'s Wife

After seven years  
my voice is shrill  
and my mouth rusted  
from spitting nails  
I am a stranger to you  
no longer slim  
and warmly scented  
I have ridden tractors  
and pillows  
with equal acceptance  
and have cemented stairs  
after storm damage  
my hands are callus encrusted  
children cry  
for me in the night  
and I alone still  
their fears.  
Grant me amnesty --  
I have managed.

**Long Island Great Books Council**  
**14 Bay Second Street**  
**Islip, L.I., N.Y. 11751**