

THE TRICORN

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Professor Nabokov

The 1954 Fall Term had begun. Again the marble neck of a homely Venus in the vestibule of Humanities Hall received the vermilion imprint, in applied lipstick, of a mimicked kiss. Again the Waindell Recorder discussed the Parking Problem. Again in the margins of library books earnest freshmen inscribed such helpful glosses as "Description of nature," or "Irony"; and in a pretty edition of Mallarme's poems an especially able scholiast had already underlined in violet ink the difficult work "oiseaux" and scrawled above it "birds." Again autumn gales plastered dead leaves against one side of the latticed gallery leading from Humanities to Frieze Hall. Again, on serene afternoons, huge, amber-brown Monarch butterflies flapped over asphalt and lawn as they lazily drifted south, their incompletely retracted black legs hanging rather low beneath their polka-dotted bodies. And still the college creaked on. Hard-working graduates, with pregnant wives, still wrote dissertations on Dostoevski and Simone de Beauvoir. Literary departments still labored under the impression that Stendhal, Galsworthy, Dreiser, and Mann were great writers . . .

No prett. sentimental view of college life here. In **Pnin**, Vladimir Nabokov looks back on his professional days at Cornell University with his customary icy eye. A wicked man, a man with no tolerance for fools or hypocrites. In this passage, the famous lepidopterist pins and mounts students, teachers, and literary icons. Only the Monarch butterflies escape his scorn; their exquisitely exact description tells us where Nabokov's affections lie. Here, also from **Pnin**, is Nabokov, on a fellow academic:

Two interesting characteristics distinguished Leonard Bloreng, Chairman of French Literature and Language; he disliked Literature and he had no French. This did not prevent him from traveling tremendous distances to attend Modern Language conventions, at which he would flaunt his ineptitude as if it were some majestic whim, and parry with great thrusts of healthy lodge humor any attempt to inveigle him into the subtleties of the parley-voo.

Nabokov's Professor Pnin is the true scholar Bloreng is not. But his accent and dry manner make his course difficult for his few loyal students. No one joins him when he laughs at his own academic jokes. Lucky Russian language and literature students at Cornell in the 1950's found themselves in the classroom not of Professor Pnin, but of Professor Nabokov. The Nabokov lectures on literature, published this fall, were discussed in the September 25 issue of the New York Review of Books by John Updike, that most astute and generous of critics. He writes:

Nothing one has heard or read about them (the lectures) has quite foretold their striking, enveloping quality of pedagogic warmth. The youth and somehow femininity of the audience have been gathered into the urgent, ardent instructor's voice. "The work with this group has been a particularly pleasant association between the fountain of my voice and a garden of ears - some open, others closed, many very receptive, a few merely ornamental, but all of them human and divine."

The central tenet of Nabokov's teaching and writing: "Style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash." Nabokov loathes the ill-written "novel of ideas" exemplified by Dreiser's **An American Tragedy**. His own books are not novels of ideas, but neither are they "art for art's sake." Though they are gorgeous constructions, he cannot deny the importance, if not the primacy, of ideas in his work. His books burst with pronouncements on matters esthetic, sociological, technological, scientific, ethical, psychological. In all of Nabokov's books, the elegance and grace of the language are salient, but the tone is nearly always ironic. Surely he ended long writing sessions with his elevated eyebrows as tired as his hand. Only in rare passages in the novels does he describe the worlds he creates in a straight-on manner. But in **Speak, Memory** he recreates his enchanted childhood with no ironic overtones. Here, in that most beautiful of autobiographies is the fifteen-year-old Nabokov reading his first poem to his mother:

As my memory hesitated for a moment on the threshold of the last stanza, where so many opening words had been tried that the finally selected one was now somewhat camouflaged by an array of false entrances, I heard my mother sniff. Presently I finished reciting and looked up at her. She was smiling ecstatically through the tears that streamed down her face. "How wonderful, how beautiful," she said, and with the tenderness in her smile still growing, she passed me a hand mirror so that I might see the smear of blood on my cheekbone where at some indeterminable time I had crushed a gorged mosquito by the unconscious act of propping my cheek on my fist. But I saw more than that. Looking into my own eyes, I had the shocking sensation of finding the mere dregs of my usual self, odds and ends of an evaporated identity which it took my reason quite an effort to gather again in the glass.

All writers are teachers, whether or not they ever enter a classroom. Vladimir Nabokov's most brilliant lecture could not have imparted the lesson we learn from the passage above.

Any Questions?

Do you ever wonder why Great Books participants in the group you lead don't ask more questions? An article entitled "Opening the Way for Questions" written by Dr. Caryl Marsh, a social psychologist, tells us that classroom teachers and museum tour guides have been able to increase the number of questions asked by students and museum visitors by the use of two simple techniques.

The first is to ask the type of questions that they would like their students or museum-goers to ask - telling them in effect, "Don't be embarrassed; it's okay to ask these kinds of questions."

The second technique is to increase "wait-time" which is defined as the amount of time a student is allowed before beginning to reply to a question. Museum visitors, when asked questions like "Is this art?" or "Why is this art?" and allowed a six second wait-time asked seven times as many questions as did the lectured visitors. In addition, they were not safe questions about the artist's life and times but interpretive questions concerned with meanings and values.

An analysis of classroom tapes showed that most teachers gave their students only about one second to start to respond before repeating or rephrasing the question, asking a different question, or calling on another student. If a student did respond, the teacher would usually react in some way or ask another question in less than two seconds. These short wait-times tend to discourage discussion. In classrooms where the wait-time was three seconds or more there were more sustained exchanges among students, interpretations were offered without being solicited and students asked more questions.

One museum guide who became skilled at framing interpretive, open-ended questions found that with this approach she was attracting new visitors while her tour was en route rather than losing them as she had done in the past. She said, "I'm convinced now that visitors are here on a less superficial basis than I might have thought before. There is an underlying element of 'What's this all about? Why is this important? How can it enrich my life?' "

Chuck Ferrara

The Gifted Mouse and the Thankful Cat

A Mouse looked up at the Christmas tree

"Is there anything there," he squeaked, "for Me?"

"No!" snarled the Cat, with her whiskers a-quiver,

"And I'll dine, now you're here, on your lights and your liver!"

But O," cried the Mouse, as he cowered and trembled,

"Then why then O why are these goodies assembled?"

"The stars on the tree and the icicles hanging,

"And the angel on high and the snow softly gleaming?"

"Are they here just to lure me to enter this house

"So a cat (who hates turkey) can dine on roast mouse?"

"I have counted the presents, both the large and the small;

"There are over a hundred - must YOU have them all?"

"Can't you - it's Christmas - release me today

"And give me a present to take on my way?"

"Look, up on top there's a package will do,

"Wrapped in blue tissue, silver ribbon, and glue;

"I know you'll not miss it - it's frightfully small -

"And I've never, no never, had a present at all!"

"Well," purred the Cat, while retracting his claws,

"You have moved me to mercy, and not without cause.

"But tell me, little Mouse, how you learned with such skill

"To work with such eloquence on a Cat's savage will?"

"I am," said the Mouse, as he hugged his wee package,

"Not especially gifted at clatter and clackage;

"But the library here where I usually abide

"Has a Great Books Discussion Group meeting inside.

"And I creep to the mouth of my hole, where I listen,

"And as a result I'm a fair dialectician.

"That is the source of the skill that you mention

"As the reasonable rhetoric of cat crime prevention."

"The moral is clear," said the Cat, pondering cause,

"To all who will read, and can feel Nature's laws;

"Since Mouse got a present and escaped my cruel hooks,

"Let us all ('tis the season) give thanks for Great Books."

Gus Soderberg

Boston News

*There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any coursers like a page
Of prancing poetry.*

The Boston Council has produced not a frigate, but a packet boat. Four works: **Genesis**, Plato's **Meno**, Sophocles' **Oedipus Rex**, and Tennyson's "**Ulysses**" are now available in a readings packet. The Council conceived the packet to serve two principal functions: The first is to provide material for four discussions for any group in the interval between sending an order to the Great Books Foundation and the arrival of the books. The packet could be especially valuable for new groups. The second function of the packet is to provide material for the four leader training sessions run by the Council. The readings are paradigms of the four major types of works in Great Books: the symbolic, the philosophic, the dramatic, and the poetic genres.

Financing was provided by the Djerf Fund, since the Council felt certain that the two activities closest to Charlie Djerf's heart were the formation of new groups and leader training. The packet is available free of charge to new leaders or new groups. Contact John Mogan, 317 Grove St., Wellesley, MA. 02181, 617-237-3855.

Leader Training. The Boston Council conducted a leader training course in Lincoln, Massachusetts, four two-hour sessions last spring. The new readings packet was used. At the first meeting, participants read the first six chapters of **Genesis** and then discussed basic principles of discussion and leading, identification of issues, and the wording of questions. The second session on Plato's **Meno** involved practice leading, mini-workshops on themes, and the discussion of thematic question clusters and follow-up questions. A session on **Oedipus Rex** explored the development of issues in action through the "why-plus-action" question (Why did Oedipus exile himself?) and the value of interpretive discussion. The final session, covering Tennyson's '**Ulysses**' demonstrated the value of repeated oral readings of a poem, evaluative questions, and the esthetic approach through discussions of style and image. The thirteen leaders completing the course were encouraged to use the readings packet to start new groups.

Boston Institutes. The Council has reversed the dates of its one-day and weekend institutes this year. Because the Philadelphia Council holds a popular three-day institute each fall, the Boston Council moved its weekend institute to the spring. A one-day institute last October 25 attracted nearly a hundred participants to the Oblate Conference Center in Natick, MA. Readings were **The Dancing Wu Li Masters**, a book on integrating Eastern philosophy with contemporary theories of quantum physics, and a Zen Buddhist poem. The spring weekend will probably be held in Natick sometime in May. For information, contact Eleanor Jensen, 255 Marlborough St., Boston, MA. 02116, 617-267-7137.

Bumper Stickers Available. Yellow bumper stickers with the slogan "Great Bookers are Novel Lovers" imprinted in blue are available for \$1.00 from Sylvia Soderberg, 30 Braddock Park, Boston, MA. 02116, 617-262-1889.

New Officers. At its annual meeting last May, the Boston Council elected the following officers: President, Walter Levison; 1st Vice-President, Carol Batchelder; 2nd Vice-President, Ann Mogan; Secretary, Eleanor Jensen; Treasurer, Frank Vallier. The Council elected Adam Finkel, Jack Hockett, and Mary McCarthy to three-year terms on the Board of Directors.

Our Thanks to Bill Rossi

*We're boundlessly grateful to Editor Bill
For the three toilsome years that he struggled upnill
To edit our journal with polish and pride,
This classy creation that's read far, though not wide.*

*Boston, Long Island, and Philly all feel
That Rossi has labored with talent and zeal;
Our letters were sparse, our news was too late,
Yet the Tricorn dependably kept up to date.*

*For raising our standards, for patience uncracking,
For writing the whole thing when stories were lacking,
For lavishing all his professional skill,
We're boundlessly grateful to Editor Bill.*

Philadelphia News

New Focus for Advanced Leader Training.

"Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt." At an Advanced Leader Training Course last October, a band of Philadelphia leaders fought to overcome the doubts that kept them from using questions of evaluation and questions in the realm of esthetics. Dr. Sibyl Cohen led the day-long class at Manor Jr. College.

The morning session dealt with evaluative questions. Sibyl, who has been director of Philadelphia leader training for the past four years, had stressed the importance of these questions in the manual she wrote for the Philadelphia Council. A schism in the ranks opened immediately when the Chicago-trained leaders spoke of their minimal use of evaluation. They were taught that such questions properly came at the end of discussions, if the interpretation of the work didn't consume the entire two hours. Most, though, were not happy with this system; they felt that relating the book to the lives of the participants should be an essential part of Great Books discussions. The wisdom of opening a discussion with an evaluative question was considered. Sibyl always starts that way, since those are the questions which concern her most deeply. She moves from there into interpretive questions. Others agreed, though some feared the danger of an exchange of opinions and prejudices away from the text. The group decided that this peril could be kept in check by using evaluation questions that are firmly based in the book and specific to that work alone. Also, such questions should bridge the gap between the time of the book and our own time. Other criteria are the same as those for interpretive questions. A good evaluative question is one that:

1. is open ended,
2. the leader does not know the answer to,
3. the leader is interested in hearing discussed,
4. explores the reading,
5. can be responded to on basis of the reading,
6. is concise.

Small-group discussions explored evaluative questions based on the conversation between Alice and Humpty-Dumpty in **Through the Looking Glass**.

After lunch, Sibyl discussed esthetic questions, the subject of the final unit in her manual. The group discovered that ignorance and fear keep most leaders from formulating questions to examine esthetic aspects of readings. Leaders commonly deal with aesthetics through the "favorite passages" approach. Participants are invited to read to the group lines they find especially beautiful. There is nothing wrong with this technique, but groups could go far deeper into esthetic appreciation using the means suggested in the manual. By the end of the afternoon participants realized that Sibyl's approach to esthetics emphasizes form and structure, rather than beauty. She feels that all books, not merely works of literature, are opened up in new ways through esthetic questions: Nearly all books employ metaphor; voice should always be identified; sound and texture are important components. Sibyl believes that the unity, complexity and intensity of all books can be judged by objective esthetic standards. "Taste" is a subjective matter. Sibyl often has groups brainstorm on metaphors. These brief, top-of-the-head responses open doors into the text. Esthetic questions are not a separate category; they are questions of fact, interpretation and evaluation. Small-group discussions tried out esthetic questions on W.H. Auden's "Mundus et Infans."

The afternoon left stimulated leaders inspired to try new approaches. All felt that such training sessions should be scheduled more frequently. The group shared much more than the usual good laughs and bad coffee. New growth and real learning were the party favors the leaders took home.

New New Jersey Coordinator. Barbara Sielaff, who with her husband, Gerry, heads a Haddonfield Great Books group, has set out to organize New Jersey. The Philadelphia Council has given Barbara her mantle and sword. She has a new Moorestown group on the point of hatching, and is at the talking stage in Vincentown. Barbara plans to stir up enough interest to hold leader training in the South Jersey area. Camden County is her present frontier, but with a corps of new leaders, tomorrow the world.

Coordinator's Report. Because we always do it that way! The worst of reasons for business as usual. Last winter, when our customary Sunday afternoon LTC failed to draw the necessary number of registrants, we rescheduled it for Tuesday evenings in June and July. An exciting group of people signed on. Our trainer, Dr. Sibyl Cohen, held the sessions at her house, which meant vacuuming for her, as well as teaching. Sibyl did the wonderful job we count on her for. The teaching that is.

Now most of the newly trained leaders are at work in the field, either leading groups or serving on a team of rotating leaders. Dominic Roberti has taken over for our Atlas, Frank Woods, at Ludington Library, Bryn Mawr. Logan and Mary Shanaman are replacing Is Wachs at the Bala Cynwyd Library. (Don't think for a minute that Is is retiring from Great Books; the Wachses are merely changing neighborhoods.) The City Institute Library now has Selma Spielberger at the head of the table. Annette Zeff is sharing leading chores at the Welsh Rd. Library. Norman and Rosalie Mikalic are rotating leaders at the Levittown Public Library. And Bud Bloom and Ella Schwartz are taking turns with other leaders at Society Hill Synagogue and Beaver College, respectively.

We're delighted that all these good people have been placed. May they have much satisfaction in their new roles.

Fran Jacobs

Bix Clix

Fred Astaire was his English teacher. Desperate to learn the language of England, where he had fled from the Nazis, eighteen-year-old Emil Bix sat through the same Astaire movies over and over until he understood the words he heard spoken. He never picked up the dance steps.

In a slightly later incarnation, American World War II veteran Emil Bix needed a job. His formal education in Austria had stopped at tenth-grade level. But now he had a portfolio of "foxhole art," grounded on his brief secondary school training. He showed this work to the VA coordinator who placed veterans in the art field. He was dean of prestigious Pratt Institute. When he recognized the hand of Emil's Austrian mentor in the war drawings, he recommended Emil for a job as art director with a Boston retail firm. Though innocent of all knowledge of advertising Emil quickly made himself into an art director. He moved to new jobs in new cities as he climbed in his profession. His English became the polished instrument that won him national prizes.

When Emil was advertising director at Lit Brothers, what he thinks of as his true education began. Edith Wegman, a former Philadelphia Great Books coordinator, sold the president of Lits both a dozen sets of Great Books of the Western World, and the discussion group idea. Top executives were encouraged to join the new group. Emil, at first resistant to the coercive tone of the invitation, was talked around by Edith. When the group broke up a year or two later, he joined his wife, Eva, at Leigh Hebb's Great Books group. Seventeen years later, the Bixes are still to be found there on Wednesday evenings. Emil says, "That was my real education. Most of my knowledge and understanding comes from my Great Books years." He joined the Philadelphia GB Council Executive Committee where he swiftly moved up to the presidency as the result of his well-verbalized dissatisfaction with policy and management. He is still one of the strong-minded, strong-lunged Council stalwarts.

This auto-didact began to see the need for the academic credits he lacked. He wanted to turn in a new direction, college teaching. He says, "My years as a Great Books leader showed me the reward in helping people reach their potential." Teaching a course at the Charles Morris Price School of Advertising reinforced his growing feeling about teaching as his real work. Back to school, then, in 1974, for the first time in many years. La Salle College granted Emil fifty-seven credits, not for a vague "life experience" category, but as the result of direct examinations. He credits Great Books for this huge step forward. He was graduated magna cum laude in the new Humanities Degree Program in 1978. Lengthy revels marked his graduation.

Now there was no stopping his academic Juggernaut. Though he had not yet had a single English course, he accumulated eighteen credits and a 4.0 average as an English major during two years as a graduate student at Temple University.

And now his pinnacle of scholarship: Emil Bix became the charter fellowship student in the new Master of Liberal Arts Program that he is helping Temple to promote. Though he was the charter fellow, Emil does not sit alone in an empty classroom. The other seats have been taken by men and women who feel, as he does, that a generalist is the person who can best understand the complex world in which he lives. When Emil gets his degree, he hopes to teach in just such a program and encourage more generalists to know their world.

Some one should tell Fred Astaire what he started.

Messages To and From the New Tricorn Editor

Dear Editor:

I have given much thought to the inquiry you made to the Executive Committee of Philadelphia Council for suggestions about what we think the Tricorn should print. I firmly believe the Tricorn should continue to be the house organ of the three councils. It might also contain newsworthy items from Councils and individual Great Books members throughout the country. In my opinion, it should also encourage ideas and articles that have relevance to the program, its readings, and discussions in any way.

Isadore S. Wachs

As new Tricorn editor, I'm delighted with this first response to my inquiry, since Is Wachs suggests just what I already had in mind: an exchange of information and ideas. I want to hear from readers what they would like to see in the Tricorn. Material may be submitted to me directly, or through Boston and Long Island correspondents. Addresses are below. This issue includes an article about Emil Bix. I'd be interested in pieces on other Great Bookers of high achievement or unusual interest.

Let me hear from you.

Norma Oser

TRICORN Norma Oser
EDITOR: 7933 Heather Rd.
Elkins Park, PA 19117

REGIONAL
CORRESPONDENTS: **Long Island:** June Ferrara
14 Bay Second St.
Islip, NY 11751
Boston: Adam Finkel
12 Lee St.
Cambridge, MA 02139

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