

THE TRICORN

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

December, 1981

Adler: Still Trying to Make Philosophy Accessible

Last August 5, The New York Times carried an interview by Michiko Kakutani with Great Books ageless and indefatigable eminence gris, Mortimer J. Adler. Now on the brink of eighty, Mr. Adler has been a working philosopher for sixty years. Philosophy is his vocation, his avocation, and his passion. He says, "I literally work seven days a week, but it's not work — it's what I love to do."

In his six decades in the vineyards of philosophy, he has produced an enormous body of work: He has written eighteen books, and edited the work of many others; he directed production of the 15th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica; with Robert Hutchins he developed the Great Books program at the University of Chicago; he created the Great Books Series and the Syntopicon, which indexes the Great Ideas of Western Civilization. He presently directs the Institute for Philosophical Research, runs executive seminars at the Aspen Institute, "lectures on God and Goodness and Truth in such unlikely places as Las Vegas," and undertakes any other activity he thinks of as befitting "a philosopher at large."

"The underestimation of the human intelligence is the worst sin of our time," he says. "I've had the most extraordinary conversations with taxi drivers in New York. Or, take a large dinner party — if you propose to talk about, say, angels, or any other basic idea, you can take the conversation away from football, baseball, the stock exchange, inflation. It's easy, because people have minds, and with minds, they like to think." He blames philosophers for not making their ideas accessible for dinner table conversations. Today's philosophical writings are created in the academy for fellow-academics, Adler says. Books are no longer intended for the general public, as were the writings of John Dewey, George Santayana, William James, and Bertrand Russell. Mr. Adler sees his task as returning "philosophy to its proper place in our culture," which would make it once more accessible to everyone interested in ideas. Naturally, his fellow philosophers disapprove of this maverick. "I've been run out of the academy, but it doesn't bother me. They think you're spoonfeeding if you write something free of jargon and footnotes. But you're not spoonfeeding — you're simply avoiding putting obstacles in people's path."

In another ongoing battle, Mr. Adler leads the upholders of universal values against the relativists. Once again, his position is the unpopular one. He says, "The 20th century, for the most part, is an age in which relativism, skepticism, and subjectivism are rampant, and that's what I'm mainly fighting against." His lance is now shattering against the windmill of public education as he strives unsuccessfully to reinstate the liberal arts in their former place of importance.

Other projects he is more assured of completing successfully are the books he has planned to write in the next five years: in 1982, *The Angels and Us* will be published; in 1983, *How to Talk and How to Listen*; in 1984, *Ten Truths*, and in 1985, *The Muses of the Mind*.

Although he has been a life-long proponent of reason, Mortimer Adler has found it deficient in one respect. Reason cannot help him to make the leap of faith which he has remained on the verge of for many years. He gave up the faith in which he was raised, Judaism, long ago, and has strongly supported orthodox Roman Catholic theology, but his rational approach has prevented his becoming a believing adherent of that faith. "It's still an open question," he says. "I've gotten a great deal of intellectual satisfaction by studying and thinking about theological matters, and I think I understand intellectually what a person of Christian faith affirms. But whatever the reluctance is, I cannot make the affirmation. It may indeed be that if I were less intellectually interested in theology, I might be emotionally more interested in religion. It may be that I'm too intellectual — I don't really know the answer. If I were to confess to any serious fault, it would be the imbalance between my emphasis on the intellectual and my underemphasis on feelings. But you have to take me as I am."

We do. We accept Mortimer Adler as the Socratic gadfly he delights in playing. And at the same time, we see in him Chaucer's "Clerk of Oxenford":

Pregnant of moral virtue was his speech;
And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

Long Island News

A post-meeting discussion of a brief reading is the carrot that draws members of Long Island Great Books groups to council meetings. Discussion leaders are urged to bring representatives from their groups. At the last council meeting, the chapter of **Women of Crisis** by Robert Coles dealing with class and sex was mailed out for pre-reading.

New Classics Series Planned

The Boston, Long Island, and Philadelphia councils propose to extend the classics series offered by the Great Books Foundation by packaging readings for years beyond Series A, B, C, and D. Lists for three additional years of readings are being shaped into final form. Some stock of these packages of books will be stored and distributed to individuals and groups upon being ordered. A listing of each series of these readings and the manner of their purchase will be announced in the near future.

Philadelphia News

"A little season of love and laughter. . ."

Love, Power and Justice and **Love in the Ruins** will be examined at the annual Spring Seminar sponsored by the Philadelphia GB Council on Sunday, May 16, at Chestnut Hill College. The first book is by theologian Paul Tillich, the second by novelist Walker Percy.

Leaders Club Focuses on Film

Approximately forty people, members of the Philadelphia Leaders Club and consorts, gathered at Sylvia and David Perelman's on September 12 for the fall kick-off meeting. Judith Vassala, film instructor at Moore College of Art, led the discussion of "How to Read and Discuss a Film." Ms. Vassala illustrated her points with three experimental films, after attempting to indoctrinate the forty, including consorts, into the language and technique of film. Confounded by the comings and going of a black-shrouded figure, innumerable flights of stairs, knives and keys that were not where they should have been, and dreams within dreams within dreams . . . some of the forty, including consorts, sought refreshment in the dining room rather than edification in the living room. The more task-oriented had the opportunity of seeing dance used as a metaphor expressed through a moving camera in the second film, and then the high point of the evening, a French film exploring the concept of time.

The next meeting of the Leaders Club on February 6 at the home of Fran Jacobs will focus on "How to Discuss a Play." **Iphigenia At Aulis** by Euripides will be the play discussed.

Doris Auspos

Spring Theatre Party

On Sunday, March 14, waves of Great Bookers and friends from the Delaware Valley and from New York will converge on Princeton to see the McCarter Theatre production of **Iphigenia at Aulis**. This early spring jaunt to the country will include still other pleasures. Town and gown tours can visit the University Art Museum to see 17th century Italian prints from the Sofer Collection, the Princeton Historical Society, and some grand old Princeton homes. A number of excellent restaurants within walking distance of the campus will offer lunch or dinner. Those who have visited Princeton in the past always love coming again, and new visitors are invariably beguiled by this charming town.

An \$8 ticket covers the 2:30 p.m. performance as well as refreshments and group discussions after the final curtain. Round-trip bus transportation from Philadelphia is available for groups of 40 or more for \$5 each. Those who need or can offer rides can contact Aaron Heller at 333-9500 or 333-4627. For sight-seeing information, call Ruth Allen, 8-9 p.m. only, at 673-3718. Make Princeton plans now or you'll "Aulis" regret it.

Tickets \$8 each. Make checks payable to Phila. GB Council and mail with this coupon to Sylvia Kasser, Park Drive Manor, Phila., PA 19144, 849-3939.

Please send _____ tickets @\$8. Check for \$_____ enclosed.

Name(s) _____

Address _____ Zip _____

Tickets ready at showtime. Check is your receipt.

Delaware Doings

A Philadelphia visitor to the Advanced Leader Training session conducted by Barry Bernstein in Wilmington Last August believed that she was viewing apostasy. And so would all other leaders trained by the Great Books Foundation during the last two decades. But what was taught turned out to be not heresy at all, but an older wisdom originally promulgated by Foundation trainers.

Wilmington leaders are not instructed to prepare 3-5 basic, interpretive questions with attendant clusters of follow-up questions. What, then, are they taught? Barry Bernstein, who worked for the Foundation in New York under the older rules, has seen no reason to adopt the modifications of more recent manuals. He teaches Wilmington leaders that they must know and understand the book to be discussed so thoroughly that they can enter its structure at any point and at any time. Since he believes discussions should be participant-centered, he sees the leader as a catalyst forcing participants to delve as thoroughly as possible into the ideas of the work as the group travels a largely self-chosen path. The leader listens carefully, asking the "natural" question whenever he sees the need for clarification, further reasoning, or revelation of unexpressed assumptions. To prepare for this kind of discussion, the leader must work at least as hard as his counterpart who isolates several themes or ideas and prepares question clusters to explore them. Wilmington leaders have in writing only one, two or three possible opening questions. One Wilmingtonian asked the visitor, "What is all that typed stuff you Philadelphia leaders come in with?"

Leader training has been just one project undertaken by a council devoted to strengthening and enlarging their Great Books program. Seven groups (six of them reading classics) meet, an annual Spring Seminar stimulates old members and attracts new ones, Colby last summer was supported by 15 Wilmingtonians, and 4 officers not only serve their own council tirelessly, but also regularly row up the river to work as board members of the Philadelphia Great Books Council. This year, the Wilmington Spring Seminar on March 28, 1982, will consider Thomas More's **Utopia** and William Golding's **Lord of the Flies**.

All of their unceasing efforts have resulted in the apotheosis of President Doris Auspos and Coordinator Dennis Scully. The following meeting announcement recently appeared in Wilmington:

SUNDAY MORNING GREAT BOOKS DISCUSSION GROUP

Sundays, 10 a.m.-noon, starting Sept. 13

16 meetings between Sept. 13 & June 6

The theme is "Good & Evil" and will focus on selected works of Doris Auspos, Dennis Scully, Confucious, Plato, Shakespeare, the Koran, Buber, Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik and others.

Boston News

Onward and Upward with the Boston Council

On the theory that the focus of a Great Books board ought to be to support existing local discussion groups and to develop new ones, the Boston board, in a burst of resolve and determination, has this fall reorganized itself to establish new priorities. It looks as if the effort is already paying off.

The Boston board is small, and its few members have till now been responsible for all Boston council activities: institutes, special events, membership, leader training, support of groups – everything. With such limited manpower, the bulk of our effort has gone into activities that operate under a deadline, like institutes. Thus our first break came when Carol Batchelder and Peg Mahoney volunteered to chair a semi-autonomous weekend institute committee similar to the one that has operated for some time in Philadelphia. Besides Carol and Peg, its members are Bill Hokanson, Marilyn Muller, and Ginny Thurston, who is also a member of the board and will serve as its liaison. The five are already hard at work planning the weekend, which will take place March 26 – 28 in Sturbridge, MA.

Freed from one of its most time-consuming tasks, the board has turned its attention to group support. Every board member is now responsible for establishing contact with two or three groups and visiting them at least once a year. Most members have already been in touch with their groups and for the most part have been warmly received. The idea is to let the groups know that there is a Boston council — a number of groups in our area have operated in a vacuum for years — and to see if they have needs or problems the board can help with.

To establish grass roots contact with local group members and to get more of the local membership involved in council activities, board members have been authorized to offer two free tickets for our November 14 one-day institute to each of the groups they contact. Ideally the tickets will bring people who have never attended an institute before. There will be a reception for these "invited guests" at the end of the day so that we can get to know one another. And of course we hope they will come to future institutes and bring their friends.

As for problems, the most commonly cited difficulty seems to be reading material — no surprise since the Foundation has ceased publishing most of the old classics series. Great Bookers Irene and Meredith Strang and board member Ann Levison have prepared two reading lists, one an update of a proposed "year fourteen" compiled some years ago by Gus Soderberg, and one a list of contemporary readings. Known as Boston Lists I and II, they are complete with prices and have met with considerable interest. Their only drawback seems to be that even with a 20% bulk purchase discount, they are expensive.

All of this reorganization seems already to have produced results. The rejuvenated board attacked the planning and publicizing of the November 14 event with energy and enthusiasm, resulting in projected ticket sales which far surpass those of last year.

DON'T LET THIS HAPPEN TO YOU!



JOIN A GREAT BOOKS GROUP

A Classic Waits For Me

(With Apologies to Walt Whitman, Plus a Trial Membership in the Classics Club)

A classic waits for me, it contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if taste were lacking, or if the endorsement of the
right man were lacking.

O clublife, and the pleasures of membership,
O volumes for sheer fascination unrivalled.

Into an armchair endlessly rocking,

Walter J. Black my president,

I, freely invited, cordially welcomed to membership,

My arm around John Kiernan, Hendrik Willem van Loon, Pearl S. Buck,

My taste in books guarded by the spirit of William Lyon Phelps

(From your memories, sad brothers, from the fitful risings and callings I heard),

I to the classics devoted, both of rough mechanics, beauty-palor
technicians, spot welders, radio-program directors

(It is not necessary to have a higher education to appreciate these books),

I, connoisseur of good reading, friend of connoisseurs of good reading everywhere,

I, not obligated to take any specific number of books, free to reject any

volume, perfectly free to reject Montaigne, Erasmus, Milton,

I, in perfect health except for a slight cold, pressed for time, having

only a few more years to live,

Now celebrate this opportunity.

Come, I will make the club indissoluble,

I will read the most splendid books the sun ever shone upon,

I will start divine magnetic groups,

With the love of comrades,

With the life-long love of distinguished committees.

I strike up for an Old Book.

Long the best-read figure in America, my dues paid, sitter in armchairs

everywhere, wanderer in populous cities, weeping with Hecuba and
with the late William Lyon Phelps,

Free to cancel my membership whenever I wish.

Turbulent, fleshy, sensible,

Never tiring of clublife,

Always ready to read another masterpiece provided it has the approval of
my president, Walter J. Black,

Me imperturbe, standing at ease among writers,

Rais'd by a perfect mother and now belonging to a perfect book club,

Bearded, sunburnt, gray-neck'd, astigmatic,

Loving the masters and the masters only

(I am mad for them to be in contact with me),

My arm around Pearl S. Buck, only American woman to receive the Nobel Prize
for Literature,

I celebrate this opportunity.

And I will not read a book nor the least part of a book but has the approval
of the Committee,

For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times and not hit,
that which they hinted at,

All is useless without readability.

By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on
the same terms (89¢ for the Regular Edition or \$1.39 for the De Luxe
Edition, plus a few cents postage).

I will make inseparable readers with their arms around each other's necks,

By the love of classics,

By the manly love of classics.

More Letters on Leading

From Doris Auspos:

I am deeply concerned about the current trend among many leaders toward teaching. There is no place in Great Books leadership for teaching. A leader can encourage, show the way, open the doors of the minds of the participants, but should never teach. Perhaps it's time we reviewed some thoughts on leadership distributed to participants by The Great Books Foundation in 1961:

"... There is no teacher. The leaders are laymen exactly like yourselves. In most instances they will have attended a Great Books Foundation Leader Training Course. But they are, in practically every case, unpaid volunteers who have taken the initiative simply because they have that much interest in seeing a Great Books group started. They pretend to no superior knowledge of the books. If they know a bit more about the process of discussion, it's only because they have started thinking about it earlier, and have thought about it harder, than you have."

From Mack Blank:

The difficulty in defining the elements of a good discussion arises out of the difference in the taste and values of the participants.

For my money, the old principles still hold: a good leader has an excellent command of the text, and generally asks questions to which there are neither single nor leader-desired answers, but which provoke discussion of the important points the author is making. Furthermore, good leadership means a tactful effort to involve everybody. It is not a Q. & A. or teaching session. There are a number of other considerations (e.g. leader's attitude, appearance, personality, etc.) but I want to be brief.

The decline of the traditional GB program and the increased popularity of the Colby and Pocono Institutes has brought a change in standards of leadership. A sizeable percentage of participants in these institutes have no regular or continuing GB experience. To them, the leader as teacher is often unobjectionable. They are not critical of outside references. They enjoy the experience even while others may squirm.

So I say you pays yer money and you takes yer choice.

From Claire Gerber:

Some twenty years of moderating have led me to compare a Great Books discussion to the sea. It can be smooth or rough, and it is always as unpredictable as the shifts and drifts of the wind. There is surface and depth, and often an undercurrent. Most significant, there are waves — changing moods in a meeting, as we try to understand each other as well as the book. (I've tide that up enough . . .)

Leading is a magnificent obsession for me. My group could certainly go it alone. But neither rain nor snow nor broken ankle nor major operation has yet stayed me from my pointed questions.

And that's the way I see it.

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

REGIONAL

CORRESPONDENTS:

Long Island: June Ferrara
14 Bay Second St.
Islip, NY 11751
Boston: Adam Finkel
9½ Madison St.
Cambridge, MA 02139

(An e. e. cummings poem Colby participants played with)

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r

who

a)s w(e loo)k

upnowgath

PPEGORHRASS

eringint(o-

aThe):1

eA

!p:

S

a

(r

rlvInG

.gRrEaPsPhOs)

to

rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly

,grasshopper;

Long Island Great Books Council
14 Bay Second St.
Islip, NY 11751