

# THE TRICORN

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LONG ISLAND + PHILADELPHIA GREAT BOOKS COUNCILS  
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## Putting Down Great Books By Kenneth Rexroth

Periodically, some commercial critic picks up a bit of small scale notoriety – by putting down the classics. In the last 20 years there have been several entire books which did just that – debunked, as they used to say in Mencken's day, the great books book by book in a forthright, unabashed appeal to the lowest common denominators of the reading public. An abiding characteristic of jobs of this type is a self-conscious, thoroughly artificial vulgarity of style, "Gee, man, come on, let's be pals – I'm just a guy like you who always got a C in English, and got his chick to do his algebra."

If you want to ingratiate yourself with the horny-headed public by demolishing the classics, the best trick is to pick some old timey books which aren't very good and which are slow reading, like Hugo's **Les Miserables**, or some book that bad teaching methods taught people to hate in childhood, like Caesar's **Gallic Wars**, or Xenophon's **Anabasis**, or out-of-date books which nobody ever considered classics in the first place, like **Main Street**, **Babbitt** or **The Grapes of Wrath**. Best leave the large number of really exciting classics strictly alone.

Teaching, or rather, teachers, have a great deal to do with the public estimate of the classics. Great books should be discovered with joy. They should not be labored through as lessons. Alas, the number of teachers who can communicate this joy of discovery or who ever experienced it themselves, in the first place, are all too few. The average student perforce, faced with **The Brothers Karamazov**, Homer, or Joyce's **Ulysses**, suffers through, answers the quizzes, turns in the papers, "pays his dues" as they say, and forgets the unpleasant experience as soon as possible.

Having taught the appreciation of music, art, and literature, and written criticism all my life; I wonder if these subjects should be taught at all. In an ideal society, the arts would be all around one, part of everyday experience. English literature was not taught in any English university until well into the 20th century. It was assumed that every well-bred young man could find the books in his parents' library. Before the Bolsheviks, all good revolutionaries look forward to the day when everybody would be well-bred in the sense of having the capacity and the opportunity to appreciate the greatest art and literature. Somehow things have not turned out that way.

Why do we go on reading the classics? They deal with the most fundamental human relationships, situations that are archetypes of all experience and which never change. They present these experiences with the full realization that life is tragic and comic, but never optimistic or pessimistic, and that the human condition is the greatest of all ironies "The root is man," and man is a constant. Art is not improved by technology. The bison in the cave at Altamira are not inferior to the best painting in the last biennial – and so with literature. Joyce's **Ulysses** does not improve Homer.

## Toward Better Film Discussions

Defined not long ago in a comic strip, "a film is a movie we don't quite understand." Whether or not the distinction is valid, how can we reap greater rewards from discussing either?

Our schooling in literature tells us that digging out what goes into a work of art adds esthetic enrichment. We Great Bookers are accustomed to dealing with "the word"; we know all about symbols and imagery. If a novel is set in a frosty climate, the central character will most likely turn out to be coldhearted or forlorn. Analyzing a moving picture, however, is quite another matter.

For Great Bookers, gaining insights into dialog and plot – when the film has any – poses no special problem other than to recall what was said and done. It's when we come to the visual trappings that the going gets sticky. First of all, our movie experience differs from looking at a photograph or painting; those are stable objects, not bound by the dimension of time. Watching a film works like reading a story, over a duration of linear time from the opening titles to the closing credits. Nothing revelatory about that, but why does nearly every Ingmar Bergman oldie introduce its protagonists alighting from a coach or train?

The filmmaker can opt to suspend time altogether, or to distort it just as the writer does. Film technology goes writing one better: not only does it stretch or foreshorten time, but it can also show varied views of the same event one after another. The shredding of Ben Hur's wheels is seen from track level, from the grandstand, from his own and his rival's speeding chariots, up close and afar. The filmmaker has stretched time from a split-second instant to a searing sequence.

Or we may watch an updated Sam Spade hang up the phone, and just seconds later we see him enter the boudoir of the damsel in distress. The filmmaker has spared us the tedium of tracing Sam as he leaves his office, finds his car keys, trundles 60 blocks downtown, parks in the alley, takes the elevator, etc., etc. Time has been condensed, unlike that in a TV clinker of some rookie cops racking up endless "freeway time." The familiar flashback, freeze frame, jumpcut, show motion, and voice-over techniques all distort time. The sound track may prefigure or "recuperate" quick asides from the present on-screen action, in the manner of grand opera striking a couple of foreboding doom-and-gloom notes in the middle of a love duet or wedding dance.

Movies can distort space as well as time. Our powers of perception are often challenged by multiple film images, from simple split-screens to sophisticated "supers." More important, the eye is drawn to details – or distracted deliberately – by closeups, zooms, panning, steep angle shots, and even vaseline-smear lenses creating a blurry-soft image. Static-camera, middle distance footage keeps the action at arm's length; the mobile camera throws us smack into it. Add to control of space, the magic of lighting: we tend to slip our moorings when steeped in murky darkness; we revel in clarity and serene comprehension when the screen brightens.

Film's graphic semiotics are never mere descriptive props – their message creates a present reality. Compare reading a sober newspaper report of a tavern brawl to the heady thrills of a rapidly cross-cut film sequence: the swinging doors flung open by the deadpan desperado coming at us in a full-screen closeup; the barroom babble dying down; the card players ceasing to shuffle; the bartender diving behind his counter – we're caught up in a hold-our-breath happening, long before the breakaway furniture begins to fly. No matter what comes next, the shorthand symbols of an impending event have put us in touch with an exciting mimetic reality.

Now – are we ready for the Basic Question?

EmilBix



#### **Last Fall on the Mall**

A group of Philadelphians (Great Bookers and passers-by) listening to a panel discussion of the Declaration of Independence last Sept. 12, on Independence Mall. This was the main event in Great Books Month, which began with a mayoral proclamation on Sept. 9. Bob Blumenthal, Chairman of Great Books Month, and Mary Ochs, Philadelphia Coordinator, planned the occasion, and Sibyl Cohen served as discussion leader.

### An Afterword on Discussing Plays

(Last February, in preparation for a viewing-plus-discussion of **Iphegenia in Aulis**, Jim Flynn conducted a session on "How to Lead a Play Discussion" for the Philadelphia Leaders Club. The following are some further thoughts of Jim's on this subject, for Philadelphia leaders and anyone else who is interested.)

Since our Leaders Club meeting last February, I have run across a little book that could very well be of interest to those present. The evening was devoted to an investigation of leading discussions whose participants had been **audience** at a theatrical performance, rather than only **readers** of a play. I suggest that this book might help participants, whether audience or reader, discover more of the excitement of theatre. It is entitled **How to Read a Play**, by Ronald Hayman, Grove Press, E-695 (1977). It brought to my mind, among other things, a comment made by Jonathan Miller on one of his Dick Cavett interviews. To paraphrase, Miller said that he felt it was a pity that as youngsters we were first exposed to Shakespeare as though it were literature – which it is not intended to be – rather than as a performed production.

And, to rectify an oversight, I had several times that evening mentioned Peter Brook's **The Empty Space**, but neglected to tell you that it is published by Discus/Avon, D-11.

Jim Flynn

### Philadelphia's 5th Annual Spring Theatre Festival

One of Anton Chekhov's most beloved plays, **The Three Sisters**, directed by Ellis Rabb, will bring the McCarter stage in Princeton to vivid life on Saturday, March 19. Last year, the Philadelphia GB Council scheduled a visit to the provocative production of **Iphegenia in Aulis** at McCarter. All the pleasures of that early spring jaunt made a return visit this year inevitable. This time, all GB playgoers will meet at 3:30 p.m. for pre-performance refreshments in East Pyne Hall, and then attend the 4:30 performance of the play. Once again, the day will offer interesting options: playgoers will discuss the text from 2:30-3:30 p.m. in East Pyne Hall (across from the campus chapel); walking tours will visit the Princeton historic area and grand old houses; other groups will tour the University art museum (call Ruth Allen 8:00-9:00 p.m. only, at 673-3718 for all tour information); a wine-and-cheese bus round trip will be available for \$10.00 (call Aaron Heller at 624-1400 or 333-4627). And Princeton offers a number of fine restaurants for those who stay on to dinner. Make your reservation now by completing the form below.

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Tickets \$10 each; front seats \$13 each. Mail checks (payable to Phila. GB Council) to Sylvia Kasser, #503 William Penn House, Phila., PA 19103. 569-1696.

Please send \_\_\_\_\_ tickets @ \$10 (\$13). Check for \$ \_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed.

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

I will \_\_\_\_\_ I won't \_\_\_\_\_ attend the 2:30 p.m. discussion of the play.

Tickets will be available at showtime. Your check is your receipt.

## Long Island News

### A New Group

Southampton College sponsors a program called **The Center for Creative Retirement**. Members develop and run their own courses. This year they elected to start a Great Books Discussion Group under the leadership of Mr. Emanuel Scher and Dr. Nicholas Demy. They are off to a good start with Series A Great Books.

### We Need Your Help

Attention Long Island leaders and secretaries:

Please send your group mailing list, meeting time and place, and current reading list to June Ferrara, 14 Bay Second St., Islip, NY 11751. In order to maintain a complete and up-to-date mailing list we must have this information.

## Wilmington News

FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD  
TO WILMINGTON'S 5TH ANNUAL SPRING INSTITUTE:

### THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

Saturday, April 16, 1983

9:30 A.M.

Archmere Academy

### THE AWAKENING

by  
Kate Chopin

### AS I LAY DYING

by  
William Faulkner

\$18.00 includes coffee and . . . , lunch, punch and cookies, books, and a most stimulating day. Please send reservations and checks (made out to Wilmington GB Council) to:

Georgia Lane, 115 Delview Drive, Windybush, Wilmington, DE 19810. (215/475-1218)

For Sale

30 sets of **Search for Meaning**  
@ \$14.00 (Including postage)

Contact: Dennis Scully  
2208 E. Huntington Dr.  
Wilmington, DE 19808  
302/998-7725

## Boston News

### Annual Meeting and Fall Discussion

Approximately 70 Great Bookers met at Dana Hall in Wellesley last October 16 to discuss **The Social Contract** of Rousseau and **The Lady's Not for Burning**, by Christopher Fry. It was a lovely autumn day, and the fiery leaves punctuated the fiery text of Fry. The Annual Meeting of the Metropolitan Boston Great Books Council was held in conjunction with the luncheon. The Council elected a new slate of officers and added three new members to its Board of Directors. Eleanor Jensen was elected as the new President of the Council, succeeding Walter Levison, who leaves the office after two successful terms. Ann Mogan will continue as Vice-President, Christine Silva will replace Eleanor as Secretary, and Frank Vallier will retain his post as Treasurer. The Council decided it was necessary to expand the number of Directors from 12 to 15, citing the need to add "new blood" to the Board and spread out the Directors' new responsibility for maintaining periodic contact with one or more of the community discussion groups in the Boston area. The three new Board members are Robert Canavan of Hingham, Arthur Olsen of Franklin, and William Shea of Arlington.

### 1983 Spring Weekend

The 1983 Spring Weekend Institute will be an oceanfront affair, held at the Twin Light Manor in Gloucester, Massachusetts, on Gloucester's scenic Shore Drive. The Spring Institute Committee has reserved the entire inn for Great Books use on the weekend of April 8, 9, and 10. The theme for the weekend will be decided within the next several weeks. To reserve a place at the Institute, send a deposit of \$40 per person, payable to the Spring Institute Committee, to Virginia Thurston, P. O. Box 299, Harvard, MA 01451. Total cost for lodging, meals, and discussions will be \$125.

### A Letter to the Editor

How enormously wonder-full the following tid-bit about Sartre seems. It may prove of interest to Great Bookers who have, possibly more than once, read and discussed Sartre's works, especially **Existentialism As a Humanism**, a reading at the Pocono Institute in 1981.

Before his recent death, Sartre, a militant atheist, had a dialog with Pierre Victor, which was published in the ultra-left **Nouvel Observateur** in spring, 1980. In these pages Sartre said, "I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God."

In this one sentence, he disavowed his entire system. Though old and blind, he was not on his deathbed, as was his compatriot, the cagey Voltaire, when he chose the very last minute to convert.

Simone de Beauvoir, far from dismissing her old friend's conversion as a example of a national trait, was furious. In **La Ceremonie des Adieux** she wrote, "How should one explain this senile act of a turncoat?"

How should one, indeed.

Mary Lauro

## The Only Gentleman

By Russell Baker

The question of what books are fit for young eyes has arisen again in the Washington suburbs, where authorities are arguing whether the Mark Twain Intermediate School of Fairfax County should drop Mark Twain's **Huckleberry Finn** from the curriculum. My immediate reaction is, what's it doing in the curriculum in the first place?

It's a dreadful disservice to Mark Twain for teachers to push **Huckleberry Finn** on seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders. I had it forced on me in 11th grade and, after the hair-raising opening passages about Huck's whisky-besotted "Pap," found it tedious in the extreme . . . It had been poisoned for me by schoolteachers who drove me to it before I was equipped to enjoy it . . . Schoolteachers seemed determined to persuade me that "classic" was a synonym for "narcotic." Ever since, it's been my aim to place severe restrictions on teachers' power to assign great books.

**Huckleberry Finn** can be partly enjoyed after the age of 25, but for fullest benefit it probably shouldn't be read before age 35, and even then only if the reader has had a broad experience of American society . . . Instead of pointing out that assigning the book to adolescents damages Mark Twain, the authorities argue that Mark Twain damages the students . . .

Irony is the subtlest of artistic devices, and one of the hardest for youngsters to grasp. It requires enough experience of life to enable you to perceive the difference between the world as it is and the world as it is supposed to be. Many adults have trouble seeing that the world Huck and Jim traverse along the Mississippi is not a boyhood adventure land out of Disney, but a real American landscape swarming with native monsters. The people they encounter are drunkards, murderers, bullies, swindlers, lynchers, thieves, liars, frauds, child abusers, numbskulls, hypocrites, windbags, and traders in human flesh. All are white. The one man of honor in this phantasmagoria is black Jim, the runaway slave. "Nigger Jim," as Twain called him to emphasize the irony of a society in which the only true gentleman was held beneath contempt.

You can see why a black child nowadays, when "nigger" is such a taboo word that even full-blooded racists are too delicate to use it, might cringe and hurt too much to understand what Twain was really up to. It takes a lot of education and a lot of living to grasp these ironies and smile, which is why adolescents shouldn't be subjected to **Huckleberry Finn**.

Now that the race issue is raised in Fairfax County though, the only sensible thing for the Mark Twain Intermediate School to do is tackle the matter head-on, put aside some other things, and conduct a schoolwide teach-in to help its students understand what Huck and Jim are really saying about their world.

When the great teach-in is over, a few might even understand why Mark Twain, if he'd surprised himself by landing in Paradise, would be watching them and laughing and laughing and laughing.

### A Reader's Request

Colby participant Wavel Watson writes that a number of people have asked him for copies of a poem he has recited at the Wachs Works. He thinks that others, as well, would enjoy the poem, so at his request, we print it below.

*I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep.  
There is nothing I can give you which you have not got;  
But there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it,  
You can take.*

*No heaven can come to us unless our hearts  
Find rest in today. Take Heaven!  
No peace lies in the future which is not hidden  
In this present little instant. Take Peace!*

*The gloom of the world is but a shadow.  
Behind it, yet within our reach, is Joy.  
There is radiance and glory in the darkness.  
Could we but see, and to see, we have only to look.  
I beseech you to look.*

*Life is so generous a giver, but we,  
Judging its gifts by their covering,  
Cast them away as ugly, or heavy, or hard.  
Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it  
A living splendor, woven of love, by wisdom, with power.*

*Welcome it, grasp it, and you touch the  
Angel's hand that brings it to you.  
Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty.  
Believe me, that Angel's hand is there; the gift is there,  
And the wonder of an overshadowing Presence.  
Our joys too: be not content with them as joys.  
They too, conceal Diviner gifts.*

*Life is so full of meaning and purpose,  
So full of Beauty – beneath its covering –  
That you will find earth but cloaks your heaven.*

*Courage then to claim it: that is all!  
But courage you have; and the knowledge that we  
Are pilgrims together,  
Wending through unknown country, home.*

*And so, at this time, I greet you.  
Not quite as the world send greetings,  
But with profound esteem and with the prayer  
That for you now and forever,  
The day breaks, and the shadows flee away.*

FRA GIOVANNI - 1513 A.D.

### **A Zen Story**

Two monks, Tanzan and Ekido, were walking down a muddy street in the city. They came upon a lovely young girl wearing fine silks, who was afraid to cross because of all the mud.

"Come on, girl," said Tanzan. And he picked her up in his arms, and carried her across.

The two monks did not speak again until nightfall. Then, when they had returned to the monastery, Ekido couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"Monks should not go near girls," he said – "certainly not beautiful ones like that one! Why did you do it?"

"My dear fellow," said Tanzan, "I put that girl down, way back in the city. It's you who are still carrying her!"

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