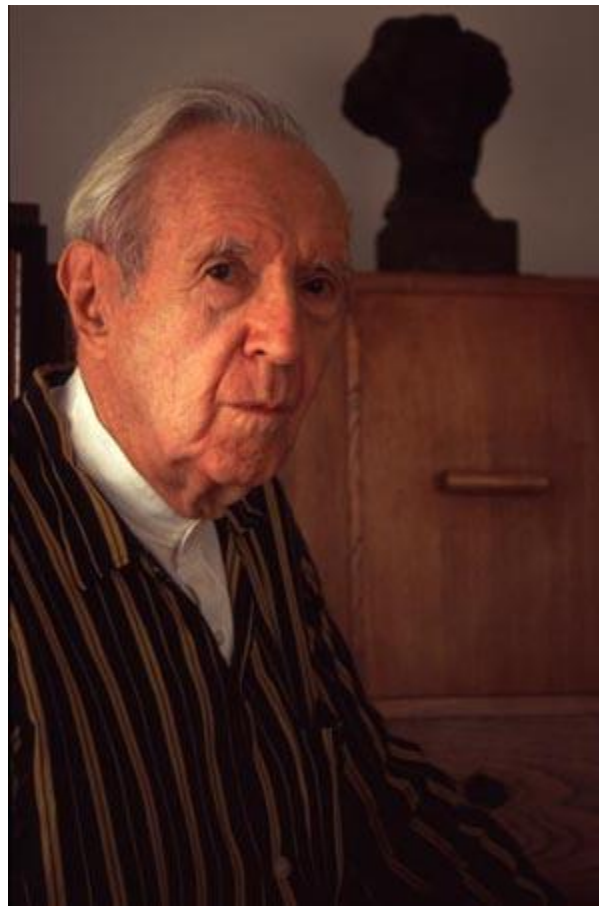


## *Books and Men*



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# THE GREAT BOOKS

by JACQUES BARZUN

1

IT IS characteristic of our lively American culture at the present time that one of the biggest publishing ventures of recent years—a two-million-dollar enterprise—should be backed by (1) a senator from Connecticut, formerly Assistant Secretary of State; (2) a Midwestern university; and (3) an encyclopedia firm, once in British hands, but now owned jointly (I believe) by the senator and the university. I refer to Senator William Benton, the University of Chicago, and Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., whose enlightened partnership has brought out the *Great Books of the Western World*.

The set is an imposing collection of fifty-four volumes comprising the works of seventy-four authors from Homer to Sigmund Freud. The price being enticingly fixed at \$249.50, a flash of mental arithmetic will show that each volume comes to the bargain price of \$4.62. Many of these are very sizable volumes; some are wholly unavailable anywhere else, and a pair of them, *The Syntopicon* edited by Mr. Mortimer Adler, are new, unique, and invaluable. But of this more later. Here I only want to give some notion of the physical bulk and quality of what is, to begin with, merchandise.

It is intrinsically precious merchandise, of course; but like all books offered in sets, it poses to the intending purchaser the perfectly rational question—how do they look, feel, taste? The looks are unexceptionable—cloth bindings of various tints, with brown labels and reticent gold stamping on the backs. The type, format, and paper complete an intelligent design which is flexible (for the length of some of the works necessitated a double-column page as well as thin paper) and which is also convenient: none of your transparent sheets where you can read all of Shakespeare's sonnets between the lines of the first one, and no gluey fabrikoid covers to make you think that this is a book you will not be able to put down.

As to the feel, that is, the weight, each volume varies, and it is true that Aristotle and Aquinas and a few others are heavy in the hand. But they are not exactly for reading in bed, and it is not to be expected that ribs will be crushed by careless use of the *Summa*.

Which brings us to the true uses of the set. Everybody knows what the "Great Books" are. They are something akin to an electric spark that flashes back and forth across the poles

represented by St. John's College, Annapolis, and the University of Chicago. They are a curriculum and a fighting slogan now happily absorbed into the language. But where do they come from? The rumor that ex-Chancellor Hutchins invented them and Mr. Mortimer Adler wrote them has been discredited. And now the title of the set tells us that they are great books of the Western World; they belong to the intellectual tradition that takes its rise in the eastern Mediterranean and spreads gradually westward through the European continent and the British Isles, to find its conscious reaffirmation in Europe's offspring, the United States of America.

Fittingly enough, it was when Americans made their first mass return to Europe, in the First World War, that the idea of the great books was born, or reborn. The late John Erskine, Professor of English in Columbia College, was in charge of an American study center at Dijon (where there is now a memorial library named after him) and there he drew up for the doughboys the first list of great books considered as a body of secular scripture. When he came back to his post at Columbia, he persuaded the faculty to establish a two-year course in which selected upperclassmen would read and discuss these great books, one each week, with a minimum of scholarly apparatus and a maximum of attention to the author's words.

This decision to make a course out of what the die-hard opposition considered "unrelated reading"—and incidentally the success which attended the teaching method—constitutes the pivot on which the whole subsequent movement was to turn. As a student in the college, Mr. Mortimer Adler took the course, then became an instructor in it. So did others later associated with St. John's and Chicago. But it is to Mr. Adler's energetic and imaginative propaganda during a quarter century that the credit must go for transforming a course into a curriculum, and then shaping the contents of both into the massive publication now offered to the American people.

In between, with the aid of the University of Chicago extension services, the great books program was presented to citizens of all ages, callings, and qualifications as had been done in New York in the twenties by Dr. Everett Dean Martin and the People's Institute. The assumption is that the classics were originally new and unknown books that anybody could pick up and read. What the group meetings furnish to the venturesome layman is a little guidance from someone who has read the work before, and a great deal of enlightenment from discussion with the other newcomers to the subject. This is the whole secret of the success attained by the hundreds of groups in dozens of cities where people have in the last decades chewed over Plato and Bacon and Freud

under the leadership of Messrs. Hutchins, Adler, and their associates.

The present set of books, therefore, is clearly intended for the laity and not for scholars, who probably own a good half of them already and are too busy to read or discuss anything so large and unspecialized and ancient as a great book. The new possessors of this set will in many cases want to join or form a discussion group of their own. But they are also given in the volumes the means of individual study and reflection. Prefaces and notes to each work are supplied, in discreet amounts and subdued prose. There is also the miraculous *Syntopicon*, about which I am purposely whipping up curiosity by again putting off further details. Lastly, it is obvious that the fifty-four volumes can form the cornerstone of a library, not to mention the decorative strip of colossal literature to fill the void in the study of the *bourgeois gentil-homme*. It is not quite a five-foot shelf: I make it four feet eight-and-a-half—standard railroad gauge.

## 2

LAST April, when the publisher and editors presented the books to the charter subscribers (and incidentally to Queen Elizabeth and President Truman), Mr. Clifton Fadiman, as a distinguished product of the Erskine course at Columbia, made one of his thoughtfully witty speeches, in the middle of which he drew out a comparison between the great books and a cure for illness—the illness of noneducation. He concluded this by saying:

“Thanks to Dr. Adler, I no longer suffer from pains in the dialectic, and when I get up at night it is only for the purpose of consulting the *Syntopicon*.” Laughter greeted his remark and, less appropriately, laughter sometimes greets the idea of the *Syntopicon*. What is it?

As its name indicates, it is a collection of topics—the topics treated in the great books—arranged in alphabetical order and linked by page numbers to the relevant passages in the original author. The *Syntopicon*, in short, is a huge Index of Ideas. What causes people to smile is that the compilers, led by Mr. Adler through the maze of twenty-five million words, hit upon the number 102 as the total of ideas they would index. Call them headings and swallow your snicker. The fact is that there are some three thousand subheadings. So persons who feel that an official ceiling of 102 ideas would cramp their style can breathe freely. Let them turn to the books themselves and they will see that no reduction of one’s intellectual income has been practiced by the indexers, but a great addition made to one’s play of mind.

Each topic is preceded by a short essay—again in remarkably clear and quiet prose—which orients the reader within each of the main subjects. Some of the great writers in the collection are quoted to show their thesis or tendency, and these are contrasted or connected before the user of the work is let loose upon the dozen or thirty subheads. The *Syntopicon* occupies two large volumes and represents ten years' work by a staff all of whose members had to combine the virtues of the philosopher and the file clerk. It is a stupendous achievement, and contrary to what might be thought, it is in many ways a *delightful* work.

I turn with professional eye to "History," for example, and read first the excellent resume of the meanings, kinds, and philosophies of history. Then I choose subhead 4a and glance down under "Theories of causation in the historical process." At first glance, the listings are roughly what I'd expect: Aristotle, Augustine, Hegel, Federalist Papers, Gibbon, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Marx-Engels, Tolstoy—in *War and Peace*, of course but what's this, what's this? William James, *Psychology*; Dante, *Purgatorio*; Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*; Darwin, *Descent of Man*; Freud, *New Introductory Lectures!* (I am skipping, naturally, and omitting the abundant references.)

What sport to turn up these passages and find out what those we never think of in connection with a given subject have said about it, out of a wisdom which was not less for being subordinated to another purpose. It *is* sport and I vote for the *Syntopicon* as what the well-read man with a broken leg will wear on his chest during convalescence. The nurse or his wife can bring him the other volumes as he needs them and unbury him at the end of the day.

The more serious use of the monument Mr. Adler has raised to his glory—and this again may seem paradoxical—will be as an antidote to the poison of summaries, which our culture and even our education can hardly help fostering. Darwin oh yes—Natural Selection. Nietzsche?—I get you, the Superman. Aristotle—Golden Mean, wasn't it? Rousseau—Back to Nature, a crazy idea. These are but the extremes of capsulation which afflict the once-educated. But even professional writers and teachers—and hence their readers and students—carry on intellectual traffic with an astonishingly restricted currency. The Adlerian map of the buried treasure is bound to add to their riches, and its very existence must in any case serve as a reminder to any of us that whatever we know, we probably don't know the half of it. Henceforth, let him who is without *Syntopicon* *not* cast the first tome: a book, like a man and like the world, is a miscellany.

BUT let us follow the buyer-who-will-read and whose prime interest is not in the decanted ideas but rather in a first or renewed acquaintance with the books themselves. What can he expect from the given fare? There must be more than one answer to this question, and I can only supply my own. Without taking back any of my enthusiasm and admiration for the enterprise as a whole, I must in describing its contents point out the proportion of merits to shortcomings as these appear to me.

Everyone understands that no reading list could fully satisfy any two competent judges; a choice is always a series of compromises. The present editors cover themselves by entitling the set “Great Books . . .” and not “The Great Books.” Yet they have to reckon with the fact that an audience takes what it is given as somehow conclusive and certainly exclusive. This collection, to which I wish long life, will therefore stand for *the* great books. The editor-in-chief, Mr. Hutchins, confirms the impression of practical finality by disclosing in his introductory essay a sociopolitical intention behind the array. He foretells our future so far as to say that it contains either destruction or a stable order, and since working toward the latter calls for the use of reason, here is an important instrument. “A political order,” he says, “is tyrannical if it is not rational.”

That word rational seems to me the keynote to the selection of authors and books. Taken in its simplest sense of reasonable, the word marks one of the merits of the set: no one who even lifts the covers can continue to think that human reason was invented a while ago by the pioneers of the internal combustion engine. And more positively, any reader with reasoning powers can herein think the thoughts of Plato and go on to subject them to the critique of Aristotle. It is this debate, called by John Erskine (as I heard repeatedly from his own lips) “the great conversation,” which the great books exemplify. In other words, the western tradition is not single and rigid, it is varied and flexible.

But one part of that tradition takes the word rational in a second sense, sometimes expressed as rationalistic, and there are signs in this set that the editors have a leaning toward this second sense. Their motive is on the face of it praiseworthy—to enlarge the area of agreement among men by arriving at more and more final truths. The *Syntopicon* usefully demonstrates a greater amount of agreement than one might offhand suppose, and pursuing his work, Mr. Adler is at the moment engaged, under a grant from the Ford Foundation, in further defining the contents of the major works of western philosophy.

This explains why the fifty-four volumes before us comprise a preponderance of works of science and philosophy. Out

of the seventy-four authors chosen, only twenty are poets or novelists. The promoters make a point of this distribution by saying that emphasis on “the sciences of nature, man and society . . . makes it a collection of great books for the 20th century.” One might question, first, whether a century already passionately devoted to science and sociology needs a booster injection, and should be asked to take it in the name of liberal education. But the doubt goes further. I happen to be much interested in the history of scientific ideas, and I selfishly welcome in this edition the texts in English of Hippocrates, Galen, Archimedes, Nicomachus of Gerasa, Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, Lavoisier, and many others previously hard to find in any language.

But of the score of scientists and mathematicians in the collection, how many are in any sense readable? I do not mean easy to read, I mean instructive apart from virtual memorization Euclid for example? And supposing this feat to be achieved by the lay reader, of what value can it be to him when a large part of the physics, biology, medicine, and chemistry is erroneous and superseded? The editors seem to me to have forgotten a fundamental ambiguity in the meaning of “great books” and to have lost sight at once of their aim and of their public.

Nor is this all. The technical literature closest to science is philosophy, including theology, and I cannot help feeling that what we are given here is an overdose. Two large volumes of Aristotle, two of Aquinas, one each of Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and Kant on top of all the ancient scientists, when only three poets after 1500 find a place, strikes me as evidence of a bias in favor of systems. These are rational indeed but their imposition may be a little unreasonable.

This thought leads one to try to discover the basis of choice throughout. Anyone who has worked, alone or in committee, upon a list of this kind knows that no single criterion can be adhered to from beginning to end. Accessibility, size, readableness, contemporary or subsequent influence, representative quality, historical continuity—all play a part in the final decision. And there is that odd respect for unexamined traditions—“You can’t leave *him* out!”

As an old practitioner looking at the latest effort, I cannot help feeling that its composition betrays a markedly Anglo-American twist—not wrong on that account but not quite so central to the heritage as it professes to be. Modern English taste has cherished Greek literature and undervalued Latin, so we get the Greek dramatists in full and no Romans; all of Plutarch’s Lives and no Cicero. By the same adopted insularity, we get Chaucer but not a word of Moliere. Coming closer to home, there is a volume comprising the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of

Confederation, the Constitution, and the Federalist Papers, but not a line of Burke. I am certainly not against reprinting and disseminating our state papers, but however great as documents, can they qualify singly or together as great books? If they do, why not also Magna Carta and the Mayflower Compact?

By and large, however, the choice of historians and political scientists is sound and satisfying. It is only too bad that we did not get Bentham instead of the excellent but derivative essays of Mill—especially since Mill is available and Bentham not. The most serious omission besides Burke is that of Voltaire. Here was a chance to retranslate and reprint the seminal work in modern historiography, *The Essay on the Customs and Manners of Nations*. As an offset to this, the Rousseau volume brings us the neglected *Political Economy* in addition to *The Social Contract* and *Essay on Inequality*.

It is in the domain of art and pure literature that I, for one, experience the greatest disappointment. There are not enough essays and autobiographies, no letters or diaries, no criticism. I would give Boswell for Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. As for the novels, they seem to have been selected by persons coming fresh to the field. We have *Tom Jones* and *Tristram Shandy*, then we skip to *Moby Dick*, *War and Peace*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. I leave out of account Rabelais, *Don Quixote*, and *Gulliver's Travels*, which are fiction of another sort. Sterne is indeed a delightful writer, and Melville a powerful one, but they and the Russian pair hardly represent *rationaly* the greatest genre of modern times. Shouldn't we have had *The Satyricon* instead of Sterne ("in for a penny, in for a pound")? And shouldn't Dickens, the true father of Dostoevsky and the greatest master of English after Shakespeare, have found a place? And Balzac and Henry James—instead of Hippocrates on Hemorrhoids and Archimedes on Spheroids?

Speaking of Shakespeare, it seems odd to give all the plays and sonnets in two volumes and not the narrative poems; that is, why not either Shakespeare complete or his great works only, not a mixed bag? The other modern poets boil down to Milton and Goethe and this, as I said, is a miser's gift, no matter what preciosity in criticism may be whispering at the moment. By sheer lasting power, Wordsworth deserved to be there; by universal influence Byron—one at least if not both. And granting the undesirability of *foreign* poets in translation, there were two poet-philosophers, Blake and Nietzsche, who could have formed a most suggestive volume.

Finally, one notes the conspicuous absence of any concern with the fine arts. Except for misleading references among the ancients, one would not know that the west had seen the



tremendous development of music and initiated the art of discussing it. One would not know that to thousands of educated people the word Renaissance means painting. Yet if great books were wanted there was Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* and Delacroix's *Journal*. There was even the chance to combine art and science by reproducing Helmholtz *On Sound*, just as there was the chance to unite a great variety of intellectual interests by choosing from the most recent times not only Freud but Shaw.

From all this it is fair, I think, to conclude that the great books here gathered with so much love and care and public spirit betray a high-minded axe-grinding in the direction of intellectualism. The Greeks and other men of science, the theologians and modern philosophers, supply materials for systems composed of analytic thoughts. To be rational with them is to be full of propositions. This is important and indeed necessary to our lives as practical and reflective men. But a rational life based on no other thought will almost certainly be—despite the editor's assurance—a tyrannical order. It needs tempering by, dialectical opposition with, other types of thought, which literature and the arts inculcate without systematic exposition, by direct working on the imagination. Perhaps the western heritage means freedom because the two types have persisted in equipoise. Pascal takes note of this in the first chapter of his *Pensées* as the difference between the spirit of geometry and the *esprit de finesse*. The search for geometrical propositions is admirable, but it would be disastrous if the unchecked desire for a canon of truth were to give us neither Montaigne's humanist, "ondoyant et divers," nor Emerson's American Scholar or "man thinking," but some sort of joyless, dehydrated western man in canonicals.

#### *Archivist's Note*

*The information below was found with the copy of this article which I found. As you can see in the following this article is from The Atlantic December 1952 edition but the undated information below was created after the 1990 edition of The Great Books of The Western World was published*

**Title** "The Great Books"

**Publication** *Atlantic*, volume 190, (December 1952), pages 79-80, 82, 84.

**Comments** JB's appreciation of the series' virtues led him to participate on the advisory board for the second edition of 1990. His criticisms were largely heeded, especially regarding the use of "imaginative literature," i.e. fiction, in the new edition in which his Diderot translation appears.

**Notes** Editor-in-Chief Mortimer Adler mentions JB's continuing interest and influence decades later: "This editorial board, especially Jacques Barzun, made many recommendations of authors and works to be included or eliminated." ("Selecting Works for the 1990 Edition of Great Books of the Western World," a note posted to the Western Canon Mailing List, September 1997: posted at <http://books.mirror.org/gb.se11990.html>, August 11, 2001.) [filed with this review]

"It is in the domain of art and pure literature that I, for one, experience the greatest disappointment. There are not enough essays and autobiographies, no letters or diaries, no criticism. ... Shouldn't we have had ... Balzac and Henry James—instead of Hippocrates on Hemorrhoids and Archimedes on Spheroids?" (p. 84) [Humor serves his ends again.]

JB also notes the absence of words on music and painting. His concluding paragraph provides a brilliant example of his pragmatist thought. He resists "axe-grinding in the direction of intellectualism," then gives intellect its due. He concludes with the thought that would greatly influence the direction taken in 1990's second edition of *Great Books*: "The search for geometrical propositions is admirable, but it would be disastrous if the unchecked desire for a canon of truth were to give us neither Montaigne's humanist, 'ondoyant et divers,' nor Emerson's American Scholar or 'man thinking,' but some sort of joyless, dehydrated western man in canonicals."




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