



LIBRARY NOTES

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY NEWSLETTER
VOLUME 4, NUMBER 2, MARCH 1997

Conversations on Great Books GREEK TRAGIC DRAMA Charles Rowan Beye

Distinguished Professor of Classics Emeritus at Lehman College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, Charles Rowan Beye is the author of several critical studies of Greek epic poetry and tragic drama, including Ancient Epic Poetry: Homer, Apollonius, Virgil (1993), Ancient Greek Literature and Society (1987), and The Iliad, the Odyssey and the Epic Tradition (1976). The Conversations will be held at the Library. Early registration is recommended as enrollment is limited to 50 people. To register, send your check for \$60 to the Library, attention Nancy McCartney.




Tragic actor wearing the traditional mask and platform shoes

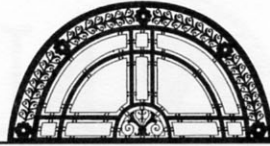


Colossal tragic mask, in bronze

Wednesday evenings, May 14, 21, and 28, from 5:30 to 7:00 P.M., will be devoted to reading Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation-Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*); Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus Colonus*; and Euripides' *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Alcestis*. Ancient tragedy is something about which everyone has strong opinions, although usually little information and less understanding. In our discussions, we will concentrate on these nine plays in the hopes of recovering the *variety* of tragic experience. We will learn about the aesthetics of all-male players moving

through a rigid progression of dialogue and lyrical choral expressions danced and sung, and how the plays might have functioned as a public institution more akin to television soap opera than to serious theater. We will also examine why so many powerful women are portrayed for an audience whose culture valorized males almost exclusively and investigate the degree to which the ideas of god and humankind and destiny are fit to the dramatic needs of the play rather than obedient to any community dogma. Finally, we will explore how well each of these plays is expressive of the celebrated "Greek tragic sense of life."

C A L E N D R	Bicycle Messenger Service: Begins March 4 . \$5.00 for pickup, delivery, or both. Call (212) 288-6900 for details.	Houdini Unmasked: Researching the Life of the World's Handcuff King Kenneth Silverman Tuesday, March 4 6:30 P.M. Temple Israel 112 East 75th Street	A Disposition To Be Rich: Writing about the Swindler in the Family Geoffrey C. Ward Tuesday, April 1 6:30 P.M. Temple Israel 112 East 75th Street	Benefit An Evening with George Plimpton as George Templeton Strong Tuesday, May 6 7:00 P.M. Weill Hall in Carnegie Hall Invitations will be sent in late March.	Conversations Greek Tragic Drama with Charles Rowan Beye Wednesdays, May 14, 21, and 28 5:30 P.M. At the Library Members Room
					



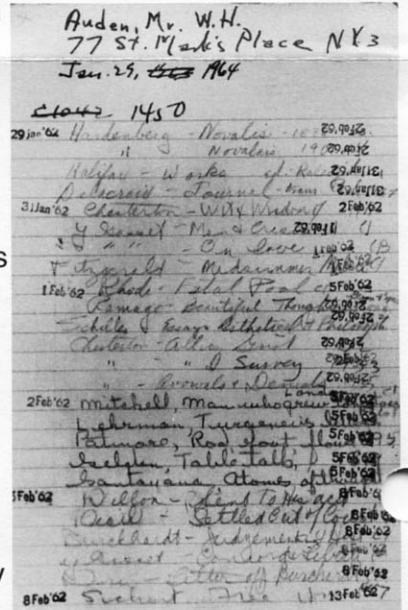
1972--W. H. Auden, Oxford University

W. H. AUDEN-- At Work in the Library

For almost ten years, Columbia professor Edward Mendelson, W. H. Auden's literary executor, has been working as the editor of *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden* (three of the eight volumes have already been published by Princeton University Press). The volumes are intended to serve as the definitive text for all the works Auden published or intended to publish--plays and other drama, libretti, essays and reviews, and poems--in the form in which the poet expected to see them printed when they first appeared, without his later revisions. After hearing that Auden was a member of The New York Society Library, Dr. Mendelson came to take a look at Auden's two surviving "charging cards." Dr. Mendelson was intrigued to see that in February, 1952, Auden had taken out an edition of the works of the sixteenth-century playwright George Peele, whose *Old Wives' Tale* (1595) became the basis of the libretto for *Delia*, which Auden began writing the same month but which was never realized as an opera.

In January, 1962, Auden checked out books by the English author G.K. Chesterton and the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, from whose writings selected *bons mots* were included in *The Viking Book of Aphorisms*, by Auden and Louis Kronenberger, published at the end of that year. Works by poets John Clare, Thomas Hood, Arthur Hugh Clough, and John Davidson were checked out in late 1963 and early 1964, and Auden published a selection of their poems in his 1966 *Nineteenth-Century British Minor Poets*.

"The two cards," says Dr. Mendelson, "show Auden in his workshop. We see him in the process of gathering raw materials for his finished works. I've found nothing comparable, except briefly in the 1940s when he was teaching at Swarthmore. Here are the footsteps of the most learned of twentieth-century poets performing the hard work of scholarship."



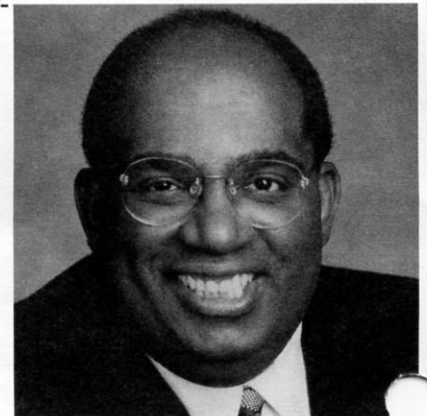
"CREATIVE CONNECTIONS"--The Children's Biography Project

Since 1994, the Children's Library Committee, with actress and educator Jamie Winnick, has developed "Creative Connections," an elementary school project that explores biography through drama.

"Creative Connections," supported by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, was first taught experimentally at the Library in early 1995 by Ms. Winnick, who, the next year, incorporated this approach to biography into the 5th Grade curriculum of P.S. 169 (in Queens District 25). The class of thirty each chose a person to study--an historic figure or a family member--and tried to imagine how that person might cope with today's problems. With the help of NBC anchor Deborah Roberts and NBC roving reporter Al Roker, the project culminated in a "Summit" in the boardroom of Channel Thirteen/WNET.

This spring, "Creative Connections" will be taught again at P.S. 169, this time with the school's own funds and faculty. A second program, for 6th Graders, will begin in the neighboring P.S. 125. Ms. Winnick will train the school's teachers to use the "Creative Connections" technique on their own. Thirteen/WNET and the Board of Education will continue their participation in the student "Summit."

The Library wishes to thank those who donated their time and expertise to edit the video of the first "Summit": Con Edison Co. of New York, Inc. (Visual Communications Department), Video Image Productions, and Laurel Davis.



NBC's Al Roker



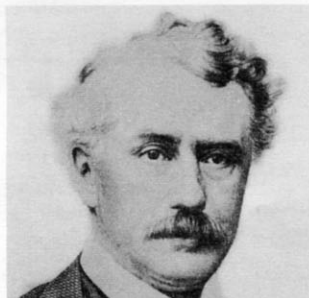
An Evening with GEORGE TEMPLETON STRONG

As portrayed by
GEORGE PLIMPTON

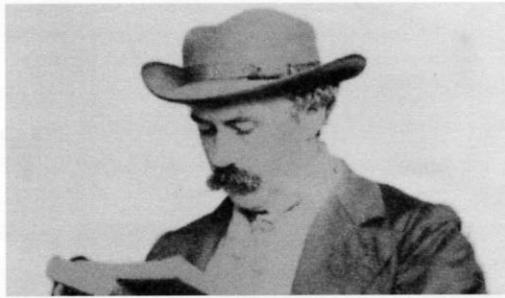
The New York Society Library is presenting a dramatic reading, "An Evening with George Templeton Strong," with George Plimpton in the role of the nineteenth-century New York lawyer and diarist. It will be held at Weill Hall, atop Carnegie Hall and just east of the main entrance, on Tuesday, May 6, at 7:00 P.M. Mr. Plimpton is the author of *Out of My League*, *Paper Lion*, and many books and articles about his personal explorations of sporting and other professional worlds. He founded and is editor of *The Paris Review*. In the PBS documentary series, "The Civil War," he was the voice-over of George Templeton Strong, reading from the diaries. There will be refreshments afterwards in the East Room. Invitations will be mailed in late March.

Mr. Plimpton himself has distilled the script from Strong's four-million-word diaries, written between 1835, when he was 15, and 1875, when he died. Writer and *New Yorker* critic Brendan Gill, active in the Municipal Arts Society, the Lincoln Center Film Festival, and numerous New York cultural organizations, will introduce Mr. Plimpton. Louis Auchincloss, the lawyer and writer who edited a selection of Strong's diaries, *The Hone & Strong Diaries of Old Manhattan* (1989), is honorary chairman of the event.

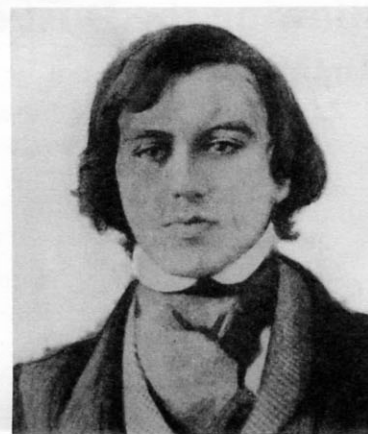
Strong, a lawyer with the firm now called Cadwallader, Wickersham, and Taft, which his father had founded, was very much a man about town. He served on many New York boards, such as The New-York Historical Society, Trinity Church, Columbia University, and the predecessor organization of the New York Philharmonic. During the Civil War, he was secretary of the Sanitary Commission, a forerunner of the American Red Cross. He joined the Century Association in 1847, the same year that it was founded. And he was a shareholder and frequent user of The New York Society Library. In chronicling the daily happenings in New York, Strong recreates the vibrant life of a vital city in stirring times.



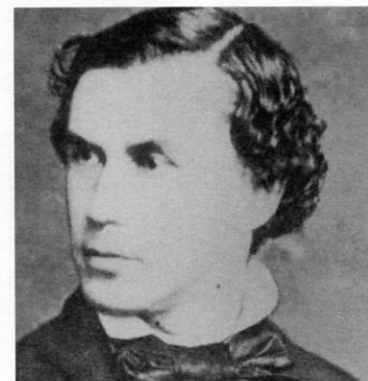
1873, June 3: Visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art...on West Fourteenth Street...The gallery of "Old Masters" is not exciting to behold, Johnston has deposited Turner's "Slave Ship" there.



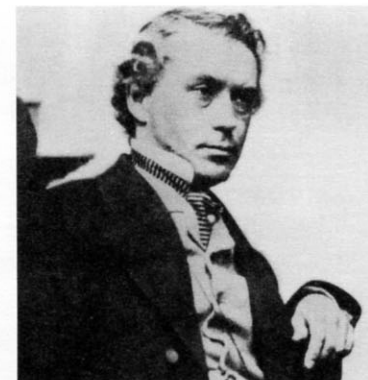
1871, June 9: To Society Library this evening. Re-read that admirable "Battle of Dorking" article in the May Blackwood. It has attracted much attention and is the best and most vivid military narrative I ever read. Some of its little touches are worthy of Swift.



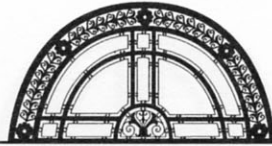
1837, April 18: Bought a copy of Byron this afternoon. Byron, from what I've seen of his poetry, is not such an incarnate Satan as he's cracked up to be.



1855, November 17: I value Mozart's music higher and higher every year, and am reluctantly conceding him place above Beethoven himself. Quiet strength is a nobler gift than vehement energy and restlessness.



1861, October 23: [Lincoln] is lank and hard-featured, among the ugliest...men I have seen. Decidedly plebeian. Superficially vulgar and a snob. But not essentially. He seems to me clear-headed and sound-hearted....



Blowing the Dust off the Repository of History

An Oasis of Calm in a Frantic City, New York's "Other" Library

In the January 4-10, 1997, issue of Punch, Christopher Hawtree profiled the Library. Mr. Hawtree reviews books and writes articles on the American cultural scene not only for Punch but the TLS, The Spectator, and The London Review of Books. Members may obtain a xerox of the complete article at the Library's front desk. Excerpts from Mr. Hawtree's article follow:

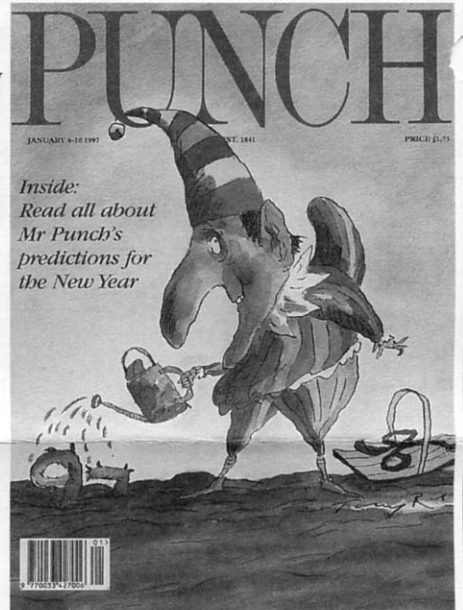
"The Reverend John Sharpe had been Chaplaine to His Majesty's Garrison in the province of New York, where he was dismayed to find that no libraries existed. He left behind a collection of books to start one that would "advance learning and piety." Some 30 years after his death, half-a-dozen of the great and good brought it into being in 1754 (a year after the British Museum)....

"The Society Library only moved to this Italianate townhouse on the Upper East Side in 1937, but its stacks summon the ghosts of its downtown past, where it was visited by Thackeray and Dickens.... Herman Melville joined the Library three times and made thorough use of William Scoresby's *Account of the Arctic Regions with a History of the Northern Whale-fishery*--before writing *Moby Dick*. And he isn't the only visitor to have been inspired by the Library.

"Henry James senior felt certain that it was his meeting Emerson there that inspired his sons to write. But, just as the shelves harbour obscure titles (*The Humour of Holland*, and Anna Rogers' 1910 *Why American Marriages Fail*), so the walls echo less momentous events: one brusque regular brought back *The Well of Loneliness* with the comment: "I'd need a chart to understand that," and two irate old ladies once blocked the entrance because their father had been omitted from *A Select List of Lawyers Who Have Been Members of the Society Library 1754-1912*.

"And so it doubtless continues....Although it now allows lap-top computers in one room, one such user, novelist Meg Wolitzer, says that in fact she likes "the unplugged feel of the place: you almost feel as if you should have a doily on the computer. It's not jazzed up. I'm always enthusing about it, in the way that one did psychology or Buddhism back in the Seventies. It feels inviolable--you get a feeling of true richness just being there, roaming the shelves, those secret nooks, dodging intense female biographers. It's civil, plummy, with the illusion of leisure, as if you're back at college with all the time in the world."

"Which answers--in a way that Sharpe might not have expected--the question which he was in the habit of writing at the front of his books: *Ad quid venisti?* To what have you come? As so often, the New World more than revisits the Old. Here is a glimpse of that Paradise to which Sharpe has gone."



For information and reservations for events, please call Nancy McCartney, the Library's Events Coordinator (212) 717-0357.
Comments and letters to Jenny Lawrence, editor of *Library Notes*, at the Library.

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