

The AMERICAN SCHOLAR

Portrait: Jacques Barzun

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Source: *The American Scholar*, Winter, 1972-73, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Winter, 1972-73), pp. 15-17, 20, 22-25

Published by: The Phi Beta Kappa Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41207072>

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Portrait

Jacques Barzun

RICHARD FRANKO GOLDMAN

Créteil must have been a lively place in 1906 and 1907. It was in this town near Paris that Henri Barzun and a group of advanced young poets and painters purchased a house which, with a whimsical allusion to *L'Abbaye de Thélème*, they named *L'Abbaye de Créteil*. There, for two years, they conducted an experiment in communal living and working, and there the movements known as Orphism and Simultanism were born. The members of the group included Georges Duhamel, Albert Gleizes, Charles Vildrac and others well or less known, all full of enthusiasm and new ideas. Among the many frequent visitors to the Abbaye was Edgard Varèse, then in his early twenties. Louise Varèse, in her memoirs of her husband (*Varèse: A Looking-Glass Diary*), notes that among other activities the writers of the group printed their works on their own printing press. She adds:

Henri Barzun, creator of what he has named "Orphic Poetry" and one of the charter members of L'Abbaye, has described it as "neither a Cloister nor a Tower of Gloom; our Abbaye was a youthful and enthusiastic Fraternity of French 'Brook Farmers,' 'Lakists,' and 'Pre-Raphaelites' all in one, whose aim was to adjust their lives to this Machine Age, whose ambition was to give the new Century a Literature and Culture commensurate with its momentous destinies."

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It was into this milieu that Jacques Barzun was born to Henri and his wife Anna Rosa on November 30, 1907. The members of the Abbaye abandoned Créteil the following year, the Barzuns returning to Paris; but the associations continued, and the circle grew to include many of the most gifted and original young artists then active. In one of his rare autobiographical passages (in *The Energies of Art*) Jacques Barzun writes:

To be born near the beginning of the decade before the first world war and at the center of the then most advanced artistic activity in Paris is an accident bound to have irreversible consequences on the mind. The first pictures seen: Cubist; the first music heard: Stravinsky's *Sacre*; the first poetry and drama: Futurist, Simultanist, "experimental," like the first new building visited . . . all this, thanks to childhood's uncritical acceptance of the given as normal, could not help forming the most natural introduction to art as it is made. Anything but strange, the sights and sounds and ideas that would later make the bourgeois howl were seen as the usual domestic occupations of family and friends; it was Apollinaire interspersing his critical arguments for the grownups with stories for the child; it was Marie Laurencin amid her pictures telling the boy to sit still while she sketched him; it was going to the studio of Duchamp and Villon in Puteaux, of Gleizes and Metzinger in Courbevoie, and while playing there seeing *The Harbor*, *The Nude Descending the Staircase*, the wonderful dynamic *Horse* in red clay and then in bronze, and other casts and canvases by the dozen.

At home the scene was scarcely different. Every Saturday and sometimes oftener, the stage was full: Marinetti acting and shouting, Archi-

penko making Léger roar with laughter, Delaunay and Ozenfant debating, Paul Fort declaiming his ballads, Varèse or Florent Schmitt surrounded at the piano. . . . On view at close range were also: Ezra Pound, Cocteau, Severini, Bérard, Kandinsky, Copeau, Bosschère, Polti, Milosz, Poirret, Brancusi, La Fresnaye, and many others fleeting or unremembered. Unquestionably, art and the discussion of art were the sole concern of all who counted in that particular universe.

Recalling a meeting in 1927 or 1928 between Varèse and Henri Barzun, Mrs. Varèse writes:

It was an interesting afternoon for me listening to Varèse and Barzun reminiscing and to Barzun describing the adventure of the Abbaye de Créteil and the creation in 1913 of his Orphic Art and Choral Simultaneity, epitomized in one of his books as: *The Voices, Rhythms, Chants of the World in Chorus*. Apollinaire once wrote: "Barzun was so right when he launched his manifesto on Poetic Simultaneity, of which he was the father." Barzun entertained high hopes for the future of this medium, which was rapidly spreading. All his life, writing, teaching, lecturing, he would continue to promote and develop it with an enthusiasm that kept him young into old age and with a conviction of its efficacy that made Henri Peyre in 1961 call him "a mystic and a man of unshakable faith."

If I have devoted a certain amount of space to Henri Barzun and his circle, it is because this background explains so much about Jacques, who was, and remains, essentially French, despite his years of activity in the United States, and his concern with specifically American problems and situations, reflected even in the titles of several of his books: *Teacher in America*, *Music in American Life*, *The American University*. Looking back, I realize that when I first met Jacques Barzun in 1927, he being then a senior at Columbia College and I a freshman, he must still have been a French citizen. Henri Barzun and his family had come to the United States in 1920, but Jacques did not become an American citizen until 1933, one year after he had received his

Ph.D at Columbia. There is much of the temper of Montaigne and the classical French tradition of belles-lettres in Jacques, who in many ways is in the direct line of the thinkers and writers known as *politique et moraliste*.

At Columbia, even as an undergraduate, Jacques was a commanding force and presence. To borrow, with singular appositeness, from Izaak Walton's *Life of Dr. John Donne*:

He was of Stature moderately tall, of a strait and equally-proportioned body, to which all his words and actions gave an unexpressible addition of Comeliness.

The melancholy and pleasant humor, were in him so contempered, that each gave advantage to the other, and made his Company one of the delights of Mankind.

His fancy was unimitably high, equalled only by his great wit; both being made useful by a commanding judgment. . . .

He was not only the undisputed intellectual leader of the campus, but *arbiter elegantiarum* as well. Jacques presiding at a meeting of the Philolexian Society was unforgettable; at nineteen he had the poise, urbanity, wit and charm that characterize him today. He had also read and remembered at least six times as much as anyone else, or at least the equivalent of what any six of his fellow students had read. At nineteen he was already a polymath, but, let it be noted, a polymath with a good disposition, who helped and stimulated his colleagues, and was never overbearing.

Columbia in those years had its share of brilliant young men and women: Lionel Trilling, Meyer Schapiro, Francis Steegmuller, Dwight and Dorothy Miner, Henry Ladd, the Italian writer Mario Soldati—to name just a few. There was an exciting intellectual activity and an atmosphere of great confidence not only in the future of art, but in the future of many among us as artists.

After graduation from Columbia, Barzun entered the history department as an instructor, finding in this discipline the most satisfactory meeting ground for his

many interests. He writes, again in *The Energies of Art*:

Perhaps because art and its discussion were the staple of my young thoughts, the growth of my mind reversed the usual order of events by which, after an interest in the worldly and the palpable, art is finally "discovered" in early manhood. Beginning with art, and not abandoning it, I was only later drawn to history; and what temperament thus suggested, training confirmed. I found it natural to study history through culture and vice versa.

Barzun makes the point throughout his writings that "History comes before art in time and in thought," that the cultural historian is concerned with people other than artists (people, that is, for whom art presumably is created), and that the recognition of art as the highest product of civilization must not blind one to the fact that awareness of the total life of mankind is the necessary prior condition for the study or even the appreciation of art. Barzun's conception of cultural history was not viewed at first with any enthusiasm by his colleagues in the department. At that time the idea was a new one, and Barzun had to work hard, in what were actually pioneering efforts, for the establishment in theory and practice of cultural history as an academic discipline. Eventually, Barzun found a strong supporter in the highly respected Carlton J. H. Hayes, and the department gradually moved in the direction Barzun had indicated. Today the study of cultural history is taken for granted, as if it had always been the proper pursuit of historians. But it is largely because of Barzun's work that this is so.

In 1936, Jacques married Mariana Lowell, an excellent amateur violinist. One consequence was the great enlargement of his knowledge of chamber music and the technique of playing strings. In 1940 he made his first appearance in *THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR* with an essay entitled "To the Rescue of Romanticism." It had been written in 1934 but had found no editor willing to publish it, a measure of the public state of mind regarding a subject which

engaged Barzun's attention for years to come. His first books had already appeared: *The French Race* in 1932, *Race: A Study in Superstition* in 1937, *Of Human Freedom* in 1939. Since 1940 Barzun has written dozens of pieces for *THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR*, ranging from extended essays on art, culture, aesthetics, education or history (or, more usually, all of these combined) to delightful observations on detective fiction or other lighter topics that have engaged his interest. It should therefore hardly be necessary to describe or attempt to summarize Barzun's *oeuvre* for readers of these pages. Most readers, I am sure, are familiar with many of Barzun's books, and are aware of his views and positions on the issues that have concerned him for more than forty years as teacher and writer. It should be recorded, however, that Jacques Barzun is a cultural historian of great and original accomplishment; that he is a scholar of immense range and depth; that he is a brilliant teacher, a linguist, translator and connoisseur of music; and that he is also a practical and practiced man of affairs.

Jacques Barzun seems to be interested in *everything*, and his interest is never perfunctory. The extent of his reading and of his learning reflect an energy of mind that seems to me almost unbelievable. It is difficult to cite an author he has not read, a composer with whose works he is not familiar, a field of the intellect's activity, including science, that he has not explored. This energy is reflected, too, in the volume as well as in the scope of his work. Aside from his many major books, there are innumerable essays (not all collected as yet), prefaces, introductions, lectures, translations and editorial miscellany, some of considerable magnitude, and obviously representing a very great expenditure of time. Appendix D of *The American University* lists 144 articles or lectures on the subject of education alone; and I have sometimes wondered if I could ever pick up a book that did *not* have an introduction by Jacques Barzun.

This productivity would be astonishing enough if it were the work of a writer and thinker with no other commitments in the

world. But Barzun is not a secluded philosopher; in addition to his teaching, he has been administrator, consultant, editor of a book club, active member of countless societies, professional organizations and boards of directors, and he is now president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. One wonders at the organization of energy that permits this extraordinary activity.

With all this, however, Jacques Barzun never seems "too busy." He is never too busy to attend to his vast correspondence or to keep up with friends (even writing most of his personal letters in his very distinguished longhand); to write an introduction or a preface for the book of a colleague or anyone in whom he is for any reason interested; to show genuine interest in his students or in any young person of promise; to work disinterestedly on behalf of artists and writers in whose work he has faith. He is a man of truly great kindness, going out of his way to advise, encourage and support a variety of people, and doing favors endlessly. He does not suffer fools gladly, but he is amazingly restrained with them. What is both striking and impressive is the equanimity he displays in circumstances that would have most of us screaming.

Jacques gives the impression of possessing that rarest of qualities, serenity. One senses in him a profound self-containment and what he himself has described as the "impersonal calm" of intellect. His presence reassures as it radiates this strength. He does not enter a room like a whirlwind; the excitement comes when he begins to talk. For Jacques Barzun is a marvelous talker, in private as well as in public; in company he talks like a character from a novel by Peacock or Meredith. His tone, in speaking as in writing, is that of the sage, never that of the prophet. Barzun is not melancholic: it is the bright light of the soul, not its dark night, that concerns him. There is no mysticism in his make-up (or at least I have not discerned any in forty-five years). All is reason, which he seems confident will prevail. He is neither rebellious against, nor acquiescent in, the folly

he knows surrounds him. But, self-possessed and evidently confident, he seems to know, not that he can conquer folly, but that he can cope with it.

These qualities of person and of presence are evident throughout Barzun's writing from his first book to his latest. The style is rich and complex, but it is always lucid and precise, lucidity and precision being important among Barzun's own rigid prescriptions for the adequate communication of any thought. The wealth of allusion, direct and indirect, in his writing often presents a challenge to the reader, who cannot reliably be expected to match the author in the game of ready reference. I write "game" advisedly, for there is usually something playful in the way that Barzun spices the meat of his discourse. Even in the most intense arguments there is a wit that shines through, and a deftness of touch that on occasion makes for high comedy. Barzun is never ponderous in the style of scholarly journals; his tone never appears "earnest"; it is light, fast-moving, and as serious as Mozart, who also appreciated comedy, and whose music is infinitely more serious than that, for example, of the earnest Bruckner.

The analogy with Mozartean style leads to a consideration of Barzun's lifelong preoccupation with Berlioz, who also represents clarity, intelligence, originality and seriousness, and who was thinker and doer as well as artist. Barzun's *Berlioz and the Romantic Century* is one of the greatest musical biographies ever written, but it is far more than that: it is a work of art that deals seriously with ideas of artistic truth and reality. It is also a book about an author who is thinker and artist like his hero, and who moves with him freely through two centuries of art and thought. It is a book about the contemporary problems of timeless art, as well as the timeless nature of contemporary problems; it is history and aesthetic, argument and narration. We meet in it not only a "real" Berlioz, but a real Barzun of whom the former is a part, and the complete reader must feel himself privileged to meet both.

The themes that recur in Barzun's work

are many, but there are four that are dominant: the necessity of knowing history in order to understand the present; the establishment of an intelligent view and appreciation of Romanticism and "the Romantic century"; the critical assessment of the "crisis" in modern culture, including the situation of education; and perhaps underlying all of these, restoration of respect for intellect and its works.

These themes are expounded and developed in the main body of Barzun's work, the remarkable books beginning with *Darwin, Marx and Wagner* (1941) through *Science: The Glorious Entertainment* (1964), and including *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (1943, reissued, with additions, in 1961 as *Classic, Romantic and Modern*), *Berlioz and the Romantic Century* (1950), *The Energies of Art* (1956), and *The House of Intellect* (1959). Specifically addressed to problems of education are *Teacher in America* (1945) and *The American University* (1968). Not entirely peripherally, we have the delightful anthology *The Pleasures of Music* (1951), *Music in American Life* (1956) and a large list of translations.

Barzun divides his published work into three categories: history, criticism and translations. These are all clearly related, if not in fact inseparable. The work of the critic and the cultural historian overlap, and the two functions do not represent a shift in point of view. The choice of works translated or edited is also a direct expression of this relatedness. In *The Energies of Art*, Barzun points out "the interest which Criticism usually takes in the sequences of history. . . ." Conversely, in *Science: The Glorious Entertainment*, which the author declares is "primarily descriptive," there are notable passages dealing with the nature of criticism.

A "portrait" of a writer is often self-sketches, not by what he says about himself, but by what he states as a moral or intellectual position. For example, in *Science: The Glorious Entertainment*:

Criticism as I understand it differs entirely from

attack or complaint. Its difference from complaint is especially important here, for I am persuaded that complaints against the machinations of culture today have become as poisonous as the things complained of. This is not surprising. Resentment and indignation are feelings dangerous to the possessor and to be sparingly used. They give comfort too cheaply; they rot judgment, and by encouraging passivity they come to require that evil continue for the sake of the grievance to be enjoyed.

I have never seen Jacques Barzun angry, resentful, spiteful or depressed, and only rarely have I known him indignant. He can be mercilessly devastating in his analysis of folly, stupidity, blindness or self-deception, but he does not write heatedly or in tones of impatience or intolerance. He is rarely sarcastic. One recognizes that disruptive emotions are kept out of his work, and are not so much controlled by intelligence as curbed by intellect.

Intellect is a word in disuse; so is grace. Instead of them we have "intellectual" (noun) and "graceful." Barzun has taken some pains with "intellect" and "intellectual," two words that in present-day usage often seem to have little or no relation to each other. Barzun makes fine distinctions of the same sort between science and "scientism," or between specialization and "specialism." One is again reminded of the exactness of the great French *moralistes* from La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère to Vauvenargues and Chamfort, and one can hear the echo in Barzun's work of La Rochefoucauld's careful distinctions among *grand esprit, bel esprit, bon esprit, esprit adroit, esprit utile, esprit fin, esprit brillant, "qui paraissent très semblables sur le papier, et qui expriment néanmoins de très différentes sortes d'esprit."*

Barzun defines intellect in these terms:

Intellect is the capitalized and communal form of live intelligence; it is intelligence stored up and made into habits of discipline, signs and symbols of meaning, chains of reasoning and spurs to emotion—a shorthand and a wireless by which the mind can skip connectives, recognize ability and communicate truth. Intellect

is at once a body of common knowledge and the channels through which the right particle of it can be brought to bear quickly, without the effort of redemonstration, on the matter in hand.

There can be intelligence without intellect; there can even be "intellectuals," usually those spoiled by "specialism," who decidedly lack intellect. What Barzun insists on is that civilization depends on a tradition of learning, on the ability to recognize allusions and references to our common heritage (now so often and so easily rejected, if ever known) of art, literature, scientific thought and the various accomplishments of the human mind that lie behind our present being. He is, in short, pleading the value of liberal, historical and humanistic education on its highest potential level.

Barzun's defense of intellect sets him against most modern or fashionable positions. He is well aware of this, and he takes careful aim (never potshots) at cant, pedantry, half-digested ideas, "preposterism" (one of his rare and effective neologisms) and the dilution of art and thought for the unlettered. He cannot be popular with the new leaders of nonthink, nor should he be. But he does not worry about popularity or being loved, and can even take or leave being called an Olympian or a mandarin, both of which in a sense he is. In Barzun's view, "Intellect presupposes Literacy":

... it is for lack of Intellect that we have such a hard time judging persons and ideas; it is absence of Intellect that makes us so frightened of criticism and so inept at conversation; it is disregard of Intellect that has brought our school system to its present ridiculous paralysis.

On the surface, many of Barzun's views may be read as defensive, patrician and rearguard. Certainly his values are not those which govern society in the 1970s. But his position is very clear: he does not plead for a "return" to anything; he is under no illusion about past golden ages; he simply and cogently reaffirms belief in values that to him seem necessary to civil-

ized life at any time: grace, literacy, manners, thought itself.

"Conversation is the testing ground of manners." There is a phrase that could have come straight from La Rochefoucauld, a maxim or *pensée* or *réflexion morale*. In this brief observation Barzun establishes a whole world of reference and makes his own relation to it clear. Manners are not merely ornamental, conversation is not simply exchange of words:

... manners are minor morals which facilitate the relations of men, chiefly through words. When those verbal relations are deliberately staged, for no other purpose than pleasure, men find themselves engaged in an intellectual exercise that is one of the delights of life. Manners, therefore, are not solely a clue to the deeper moral assumptions of an age, they are also a strong or weak guardian of Intellect at its most exposed.

Conversation with Jacques Barzun is indeed one of the delights of life. For it, one needs all of one's resources, and one must stay honest. Jacques is an expert at puncturing pretension, and he never commits the misdemeanor of quoting himself. The fresh, free flow of ideas, comments, opinions, paradoxes, witticisms and questions brings cheer to the soul and encourages response. His intimate correspondence has the same style and character; it is conversation in blue ink. And it might be added that the volume of this correspondence is prodigious. Not being "too busy" is seen also to be a part of manners.

Jacques Barzun is the only author of my acquaintance who has damaged a leg as a direct result of writing. After an account of a difficult summer he writes:

At the end, too, I did something stupid, which has got me partly crippled. I write on a writing board and I apparently kept it propped up too long—or with too heavy a weight of books—on one crossed knee. The result was some disorder of the circulation which found a weak spot in my broken ankle, and I've been hobbling ever since, with odd thrills and sensations up and down the leg.

Forgive this clinical vision: it only shows that

writing is a very dangerous trade.

Would Jacques agree with Rémy de Gourmont?

Writing is a trade, and I should like it to be listed in its alphabetical order, between shoe-making and carpentry [In French: *cordonnerie* . . . *écriture* . . . *menuiserie*] rather than as something separate from other spheres of man's activity. . . . To write is to exist, to set one's self apart. To have a style is to speak a special dialect, unique and inimitable, within the frame-work of the common language, so that this becomes at one and the same time the language of everybody and the language of one. . . . This does not obviate the fact that one must write for men as if one were writing for angels; for in that way one approaches, to the best of one's craft and one's character, the greatest possible beauty, however ephemeral and perishable it may be. . . . (*La Culture des Idées*, 1899).

Jacques Barzun's most recent book (except for *A Catalogue of Crime*) appeared in 1971 as *Jacques Barzun on Writing, Editing and Publishing*. This is a collection of related short essays dealing with the "trade" of writing, dating from 1945 to 1969. In his foreword to this volume Morris Philipson, director of the Chicago University Press, writes:

Barzun's crucial terms of evaluation are moral, not aesthetic. What is execrable is what misleads, what traduces, what injects error, what cloaks the absence of thought or feeling, what pretends to be something other than it is, what is false. . . .

Where transparency of the medium is coupled with density of thought or richness of feeling, Barzun argues, the contrast yields eloquence, the greatest power inherent in the artful use of language.

In personal relations the analogue of eloquence is the power to charm. Charming another (unlike merely entertaining him) enriches that person through such fascinating communication as enhances his sense of vital experience. He is made wiser or warmer for it—"more alive". . . . We are offered precious little in our formal or informal education to help us cultivate the power to charm and, similarly, there are all too few counsels to help writers

cultivate the power of effectiveness, let alone eloquence.

Eloquence in writing or speaking, charm in the society of men and women, are not among the qualities most conspicuously admired in our times. In a sense they are old-fashioned; we have not time to be charming or much ability or desire to be eloquent. But it is still possible to be both, as Barzun proves. And to the defense of his ideas he brings not only his learning, intelligence and wit, but his eloquence and charm as well. Again and again in his writing, Barzun demonstrates also that he can be both elegant and tough. In the epilogue to *Classic, Romantic and Modern* there is a brief passage that wonderfully illustrates Barzun's temper. After a powerful discussion of the dissolution or "self-extinction" of art today, he writes:

To say this is not to condemn the age, but to discern its fate. There are moments in history, as Burke late in life observed of the French Revolution, when the tide sets so universally in one direction that the spectacle is like the hand of Providence at work. A man—or even mind itself—would be time's fool to say anything but that the outcome bears the seal of necessity. And just as intellect should refrain from passing judgment, so should the moral sense and the intimate emotions. There is nothing to reprove and nothing to bewail.

With the Philistines in command and the barbarians within the gates, it takes courage and magnanimity to say that there is nothing to reprove and nothing to bewail. I cannot say that I agree that this is so, but tempers and temperaments differ, and Jacques does not yield to discouragement or despair. In an age of confusion and disintegration, all of his work is aimed at helping us to understand the prejudices and superstitions that seem to govern the world. Whether treating of contemporary "crisis," or illuminating the work of such diverse artists and thinkers of the past as Byron or Bagehot, Goethe or Gautier, Diderot or Darwin, Barzun's writing is directed to the recall of our sense of history

PORTRAIT: JACQUES BARZUN

and to helping us see “who we are in the stream of time and Western thought.” That is the proper reading of history and one of the continuing functions of intellect.

To convey, in a short essay, the unity and variety of Jacques Barzun is not easy. And perhaps the best “portrait” of him was drawn some two hundred and sixty years ago by Alexander Pope in the *Essay on Criticism*:

But where’s the man, who counsel can bestow,

Still pleased to teach, and yet not proud to know?

Unbiased, or by favour, or by spite;
Not dully prepossessed, nor blindly right;
Though learned, well-bred; and though well-bred, sincere;

Modestly bold, and humanly severe:
Who to a friend his faults can freely show,
And gladly praise the merit of a foe?
Blest with a taste exact, yet unconfined;
A knowledge both of books and human kind;
Generous converse; a soul exempt from pride;
And love to praise, with reason on his side?

Harlow Shapley

1885-1972

Member, AMERICAN SCHOLAR Editorial Board, 1940-1972

“His name will forever be listed with the names of the great scientific philosophers, from Aristotle and Ptolemy through Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, to Hubble and Einstein.”

—BART J. BOK