

Jacques Martin Barzun
(November 30, 1907 – October 25, 2012)

FROM DAWN TO DECADENCE?

The Amazing Century of Jacques Barzun

Modris Eksteins

ON NOVEMBER 30 1907 Jacques Barzun will achieve something extraordinary, a century. As well as one hundred years, a century is, of course, one hundred runs tallied by a batsman in cricket. On the subject of cricket, at roughly the halfway point of his illustrious life, Jacques Barzun was less than charitable. In his famous paean to the game of baseball, “the true realm of clear ideas,” and “elegance itself,” he was naughtily cruel about cricket. “Is it likely,” he asked, tongue firmly in cheek, “that people capable of inventing a game would make it consist of such objects as sticky wickets, creases, fast bowlers, overs, and centuries?” But perhaps, now that he himself will have attained that cherished goal, in the greatest game of all, he will have mellowed. Would it be outland-

ish to suggest that we celebrate his birthday on the village green of our global community with a bowl of (Chilean?) strawberries smothered in clotted (Devon?) cream followed by a spot of Darjeeling? Jacques Barzun is, after all, not only professor emeritus of Columbia but also, by most apposite title, “extraordinary fellow” of an elite cricketing circle, Cambridge University.

On his birthday the bravi will assuredly resound far and wide. They will echo here, albeit the only explicit mention of Canada in his most recent book is to an “illiterate guide in the Canadian woods”! (We, unlike New York baseball fans, are a generous people, are we not?) They will resound there, in Créteil, suburb of Paris, where he was born; New York, at Columbia, where he graduated as valedictorian in 1927 and then taught for all those years, until 1975; San Antonio in Texas, his wife’s hometown, whither he retired but a decade ago. And they will be heard everywhere on this now small planet of ours where his books, so many, and ideas, so critical, circulate.

Circulate? What a humdrum word, hardly the mot juste, to represent the achievement of this man of culture and grace. Circulate suggests for us quite the reverse: traffic, crowds, congestion, a material world exuding fumes, futility, and fatigue. Jacques Barzun—a man who has said “The first achievement of human society and its rarest pleasure is Conversation”—does not circulate; he hovers, and drops in. Still, despite his almost supernatural powers he has never pretended to be some ethereal being. *Time* magazine put him on its cover in June 1956 to accompany a lead story on “America and the Intellectual: The Reconciliation.” George Kennan had remarked, in the wake of the McCarthy witch hunts, that he could think of few countries in the world “where the artist, the writer, the composer or the thinker is held in such general low esteem as he is here in our country.” William Faulkner, Nobel Prize winning novelist, had enjoined: “I ain’t no intellectual.” Jacques Barzun thought it was time to bring everybody back to their senses and was featured by *Time* as the perfect intermediary between America and its thinkers. More recently that most down-to-earth of television journalists, Andy Rooney, has said that Jacques Barzun is the smartest man he knows.

This man, whose prose is rarely anything but a delight, who can reduce philosophical sinew and cultural crud to edible morsel, has bewitched me since I was an undergraduate. I was smitten then by his *Darwin, Marx, and Wagner* (1941; 2nd ed. 1958); it would influence profoundly my thinking about the disasters that befell Europe and the world in the first half of the twentieth century.

Budding disciple, I then read much of his other work—on Berlioz, on the Romantics, on William James. Most recently, I joined the throngs of admirers who felt that his 800-page essay on the last half-millennium, *From Dawn to Decadence* (2000), was, given the pleasure it provided, heartlessly brief. Celebration and elegy at once, the book is an astonishing discourse, by a nonagenarian, on the rise and, arguably, fall of Western civilization.

In this *summa summarum*, as in his other work, Barzun looks at culture in a manner that we now shy away from. To him culture is intellectual and spiritual accomplishment. Culture is of course rooted in time and space and hence an organic emanation – “... all social facts and forces become the matrix, and sometimes the subject, of the artist’s work,” he wrote in *Berlioz and the Romantic Century*—but in contrast to the anthropologists, culture for Barzun, as for Matthew Arnold, is an achievement of imagination that transcends the mundane—the pots and pans of life—and is at the same time more specific than the totality of custom and ritual of a group. Culture, to merit the term, must for Barzun have value beyond the immediate. Despite prolonged onslaught from social scientists, egalitarians, and purveyors of political correctness, Jacques Barzun has stood his ground and insisted that culture belongs to that luminous realm of “sweetness and light.” Moreover, the turn-of-century to which he was born remains for him, despite ominous signs to the contrary present at the time, a kind of apotheosis of Western achievement. Minds like those of Oscar Wilde, the young G. B. Shaw, and especially William James manifested an energy and insight that, he argues, have not been repeated since. The antithesis to this *belle époque* before the storm is a world—alas, our world—where standards and values have collapsed, where the negative and the absurd have triumphed, an ever darkening world. Separatism and disorder have in his lifetime, he says, replaced pluralism and common sense. “To appear unkempt, undressed, and for perfection unwashed,” he notes with a characteristic *mélange* of sarcasm and melancholy, “is the key signature of the whole age.”

The fulcrum for the “Great Switch,” from common sense to absurdity, when for instance liberalism became conservatism, or for the “Unfitting,” his *bon mot* for the vogue of intellectual “deconstruction”—to mention two of his favourite rubrics for our *malaise*—was the Great War. Turning age seven shortly after the war started he still remembers the marauding German Tauben over Paris and especially the ongoing fear of artillery bombardment. The war savaged not only the landscape of the Western Front but also the mindscape of Western man. (Western man? Yes. He refuses unabashedly to surrender language to the gender militancy of our

day.) With its material and moral devastation the war brought a “tide of egalitarianism” that was accompanied by a classic manic-depressive cycle, first “frivolity” and then “self-destruction,” a decline that seemed to accelerate as the century wore on and particularly, he feels, as it neared its end.

Now why did this failure take place? Barzun is interested in conditions and influences, not causes. Any notion of causality belongs for him to the nefarious realm of scientism and mechanism. In *Darwin, Marx, and Wagner*, he developed his influential thesis about “the triumph of the absolute,” the victory of a scientific mindset in Western thought and culture, evident in the “laws” postulated by that triumvirate of certainty, Darwin on evolution, Marx on history, and Wagner on the arts as a whole. The vitalistic reaction toward the end of the century embodied by William James, whose “radical empiricism” Barzun has always admired deeply, served as temporary counterpoint. But then came the war and the victory of the machine mentality, followed by that enervating conflict’s offspring, the totalizing regimes of bolshevism and fascism. The shift from the democratic to the demotic, this “contagion of populism,” would continue apace through the rest of the century. Comfort has been replaced by convenience, education by entertainment. “The whole world wants,” he opines toward the end of *From Dawn to Decadence*, “not freedom, but emancipation and enjoyment.”

As outcome in the longer term, Barzun foresees the advent of a mammoth ennui—a not uncommon vision, posited by Friedrich Nietzsche and shared of late by Francis Fukuyama—followed, however, by an eventual return of interest, at some point in the future, in the achievements of Western civilization. Those students who in 1968, in the midst of the last century’s culture wars, shouted “Western civ has got to go,” will finally, he hopes, have their much deserved come-uppance.

This last Barzunian tome, especially, reads like a conversation with a wise and humorous, if cantankerous, tutor, and, while never having had the pleasure, I can imagine that the tone of the legendary graduate seminar offered for a quarter century at Columbia by Barzun and his equally eminent colleague Lionel Trilling must have been rather similar. Among the students admiration and excitement would have been joined by an intense trepidation about voicing an opinion for fear of lowering the tone. No counterargument could ever be offered with anything near the smooth intelligence and dazzling range of reference of the presiding professors.

I wonder however about the selectivity implicit in Barzun's view of culture and then about the degree to which the Great War and the ongoing crisis that followed represented an antithesis to the Western tradition. Along with such dissimilar spirits as Nicholas Berdyaev and F. Scott Fitzgerald one can make a case that the Great War should be seen as the great summation. "The war revealed the personality of our civilization," wrote Berdyaev. And Fitzgerald, in *Tender Is the Night*, called the war "a love battle—there was a century of middle-class love spent here." He conjured up images of "Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence, and beer gardens on Unter den Linden, and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers." Notions of duty, respectability, loyalty, and patriotism—and indeed of education and comfort—culminated in the trench warfare of 1914-18. The culture of imperialism—intellectual and political—reached its zenith. In the disasters that followed the great phrases and ideals shattered, as if hit by high explosive.

While the war still evokes endless regret about lives lost and innocence sullied, perhaps its sundering of the idea of certainty, and the irony, questioning, and torment that it evoked were in the end a positive outcome. In the long run that frightful dehumanizing conflict, and especially its memory, made us, ironically, more human, more humble. A similar argument can be made about the mind-numbing genocide and devastation of the Second World War and the use of atomic weapons at the end. On visiting the continent after the war, the poet Stephen Spender would write: "The destruction is serious in more senses than one. It is a climax of deliberate effort, an achievement of our civilization, the most striking result of collaboration between nations in the twentieth century. It is the shape created by our century, as the Gothic cathedral is the shape created by the Middle Ages." The pictures of blitzed German and Japanese cities and then the vision of the mushroom cloud imposed on nuclear scientists and politicians an image of consequence that may have precluded the subsequent use of these terrible weapons during the Cold War. Thus the calamity and horror may have served a purpose, to illustrate our terrifying power but even more strikingly our terrifying limitations.

Jacques Barzun has always remained a firm advocate of his calling, history. The historian, he has felt, has the potential to be the supreme man of letters, teller of stories that entertain and teach, expositor of culture. He has always revelled in the opening words of the fairy tale, "Once upon a time..." History represents enchantment and, he claims, "spiritual transformation." "Its spectacle

of continuity in chaos, of attainment in the heart of disorder, of purpose in the world is what nothing else provides: science denies it, art only invents it.” Over the years, as these passages indicate, he has written some masterful essays promoting his *métier*. In his last book, however, one notes a deep sadness about the state of the art: “... history is bereft in an age like ours.... Can a case still be made for Cinderella?”

I confess that I share Barzun’s foreboding about the discipline as our faith in broader narrative has imploded. This crisis, too, surfaced dramatically in the wake of the First World War. History had been the grand subject of the nineteenth century, this age of expansion, this *saeculum historicum*. Benedetto Croce, the Italian thinker, insisted that his first love, philosophy, had been outdone by his later amour, history: “It is a curious fate,” he wrote, “that history should for a long time have been considered and treated as the most humble form of knowledge, while philosophy was considered as the highest, and that now it not only is superior to philosophy but annihilates it.” Nietzsche had thrown poison darts earlier at established notions of history, but it was the Great War that tossed a mammoth spanner into the historical mindset, especially into the notion that history involves progression. Ford Madox Ford’s hero, Tietjens, loses his memory in the trenches. Thomas Mann would write a story in 1925, *Unordnung und frühes Leid* (Disorder and Early Sorrow), whose main protagonist is a professor of history, with wife and four children. The children call their parents “the ancients” and their grandparents “the ur-ancients”; the eldest son, seventeen at the time, wears eye-shadow and wants to become a dancer, cabaret artist, or waiter. “For a professor of history,” Mann writes, “this is impossible to take in.”

In ensuing years the situation would become even more precarious and “impossible to take in” for the historian. Historical reality—in the form of a monumental nihilism—would outdistance the historian’s powers of perception and representation. In 1961 in his classic query *What Is History?* the venerable E. H. Carr had a lovely formulation: “... after the First World War, the facts seemed to smile on us less propitiously than in the years before 1914....”

As the imperial dream dissolved, the historian’s gaze moved, in stages, away from the metropolitan centre to the former colonies, to the previously marginalized or anonymous, to the diaspora. Today much of our cohort pursues, as object of study, the dancer, cabaret artist, and waiter of Thomas Mann’s nightmare. The bottom-up, outside-in approach, liberated from the grand narrative that Mann’s historian-patriarch was meant to provide, is supposed

to yield its own truths. However, historians today seem to be at a stage of re-evaluation that literary criticism passed through several generations ago when the “new criticism” insisted on a close reading of the text at hand. Context threatened authenticity and hence was purposely ignored. The artistic imagination had passed through this phase, of art for art’s sake, even earlier, more than a century ago. In this process of philosophical and methodological repositioning, academic history has, I suspect, lost any readership it ever had.

Novelists and film-makers have had a far greater impact on the public’s historical awareness than historians, whose contributions pale by comparison. In every other discipline the historical perspective has blossomed of late, and public interest in history—evident in the media, museums, galleries, civic commemoration—has never been greater. In the academy, however, the discipline has fumbled and fragmented. Journalists write more interesting books, faster. Is there any justification any longer for the “professional historian”?


Perhaps now is the time for another plea for reconciliation parallel to the one that Jacques Barzun made in 1956. History must reverse its growing isolation and return to its inherent role as a bridge in the realm of the intellect. To this end, we historians might not only pay renewed attention to Jacques Barzun’s efforts but also take a page from that remarkable European *avant la lettre* Romain Gary. Born in Moscow in 1914, brought up in Vilnius and Warsaw, Gary then studied law at Aix-en-Provence and Paris. When Hitler occupied Paris he fled to England and joined the Free French as a fighter pilot. After the war he became a writer and diplomat. He produced some thirty novels, most of them with a historical bent, read by a sizable and devoted following. Gary was troubled by his “victory” in the war; he felt himself to be both perpetrator and victim, and all of his work would be written from this dual perspective. His mother was Jewish, his father, whom he never knew, a Cossack. With this in mind, Gary, who in the midst of ongoing tragedy kept a striking sense of humour, called one of his characters Ghengis Cohn.

Gary was inclined to agree with Jacques Barzun on the subject of culture. “If,” he wrote, “the word ‘culture’ means anything at all, it means—or should mean—a pattern of individual and collective behaviour, an active ethical force permeating all human relationship and outlook.” But, alas, the history of Europe and of the world had proved that nothing of the sort occurs. In fact, quite the reverse transpires: all culture is in the end really about failure. Even the

idea of Europe resuscitated with such success in the postwar world, was, he claimed, a fairy-tale.

And yet, for Gary, both the fairy-tale and the acknowledgement of failure were central to survival and to humanity. “I have even come to think that civilizations are something failures are slowly building in their wake,” he explained in a note to his novel *Europa*. In other words, culture, civilization, and history, are not either-or matters, the domain of winners or losers. They are the precinct of humanity in all its hues. The task of the writer and indeed of the historian, said Gary, explaining his intent in *Europa*, is to underline that the whore-witch and her beautiful daughter—the symbol and summit of Western civilization—are one and the same.

Yet, how does one do this? With a good dose of poetry and imagination, insisted Gary. “If you take poetry and imagination away from people,” he remarked in an interview in 1974, “all you’re left with are hunks of meat.” Indeed the same could be said of our historical enterprise today. It’s time we paid more attention to the way we do our history, particularly the way we represent and articulate it. Without departing from the evidentiary basis of our practice, let’s put some poetry and imagination – and in the process some range and readability—back into the interpretative essence of history; otherwise all we’ll be left with will be hunks of meat, of interest only to the hyenas among us. History must return boldly in the direction of its humanist soul, back toward the arts and literature, recognizing that what we are after is symbol rather than truth, multiplicity of meaning rather than scientific formula, suggestion rather than cause. If we do this Jacques Barzun may yet become a happier man and will continue to be a presence in our midst for a long time to come.

Congratulations on the century, Jacques. Your fellow batsmen salute you. By the way, what’s your take on the oceans of spittle in baseball today? A paddle now seems a requisite, alongside ball, bat, and glove. 

EDITOR’S NOTE:

Jacques Barzun and Mortimer Adler became friends and colleagues in the early 1920s and remained best of friends until Mortimer’s death.

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