Books

Review: *A Jacques Barzun Reader*

Edited by Michael Murray. (HarperCollins)

By
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In considering Abraham Lincoln as a literary artist, Jacques Barzun ’27C ’32GSAS declared style to be “independent of attractive subject matter.” That premise is hard to prove from Barzun’s own writing because for three quarters of a century he has chosen subjects that by knowledge, thought, and style he could make attractive. *A Jacques Barzun Reader*, in its display of intriguing lures, arranges according to topic passages from about fifty books and periodicals. The topics range from the difficulties of exporting democracy through the roles of art, science, and philanthropy as enemies of intellect and on to the tyranny of multiple-choice testing and to baseball “as the most active, agile, varied, articulate, and brainy of all group games.” Selections of various length illustrate Barzun’s long-established authority in cultural history; teaching and learning; rhetoric, style, and usage; translation; music in France and in American life; detective fiction; and the advantages afforded to any endeavor by reading, reflection, and sanity.

After Murray’s introductory survey of Barzun’s career at Columbia and of the subjects anthologized, the volume begins with a recent credo of “spirited pessimism.” Barzun found confirmed in William James what contemplation had revealed: teach not how to live my way, but how to live less in hope than in acceptance. The section after this pragmatic credo collects passages on history and science as two ways of knowing. Besides the joys of great history as literature, Barzun commends the reading of history to bring perspective on the present and detachment from it; to learn that the future will hold something, but not much. He argues that attention in history to particulars and individuals provides a weapon against two enemies of intellect, the abstract and the mechanical. He searches the

past for figures generally neglected but worthy of emulation.

The selections in Murray's anthology offer as one focus 1889–1914, the period of Bernard Shaw, Wilde, the political historian Walter Bagehot, the New York critic and social analyst John Jay Chapman, the reformed Darwinian Samuel Butler, Richard Wagner (posthumously), the reign of William and Henry James, and the Cubists. If Barzun's forte is redefinition—romanticism, realism, liberalism, race, culture, democracy, philanthropy, "the nineties," program music, aristocracy, bourgeois, none of these is what you have been led to believe—the anthology also illustrates his strength in intellectual portraiture that brings to life periods, places, and enduring issues: Hazlitt, Thoreau, Thomas Beddoes as more than friend of Coleridge and father of the poet Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and the two earliest figures prominent in the anthology, Swift and Diderot. Despite clarity in the labeling of topics, there is no ordering device in the *Barzun Reader* comparable with the "cross sections," Madrid in 1540, Venice in 1650, Weimar in 1790, Paris in 1830, Chicago in 1895, in Barzun's crowning work, *From Dawn to Decadence*. Inconsistencies in classification come about partly from the difficulty of establishing pigeon holes for a mind equally ranging and disciplined, simultaneously sharp and broad.

Barzun's procedures are essentially Socratic. Of every writer or group representing a position, of every tendentious believer, he asks: Are there not sides of this question that you have examined inadequately or not at all? He reminds others who follow, as he does, music, painting, architecture, and theater that art cannot be our sole redemption; life itself includes redemption. He rebuts Faulkner's address on receiving the Nobel Prize. "It is old women, not Grecian urns, that have in their time borne Keatses and Faulkners."

Attention to teaching and learning permeates almost every section of the anthology. Like other critics of current society, Barzun deplores the decrease in civility that has accompanied the decline and apparently eminent fall of almost everything treasured by humanists. He brings up to date, in two pieces distributed recently by the Hudson Institute advocating reform in education from bottom to top, subjects well represented in the *Barzun Reader*.

The section "On Language and Style" is a must. Barzun's style, as taught and as practiced, while utilizing "the energies of art" emphasizes clarity. He employs suitable words in clear, direct, supple, declarative sentences, lucid in transitions, brilliantly colloquial. In a paragraph on words as more than "signalers," he pauses:

“What a fuss over a word! Yes, but let me say it again.” The anthology includes a tribute to Lionel Trilling, with whom Barzun taught a senior colloquium and then a graduate seminar as a team for 43 years. Trilling achieved precision by caution, progressive refinement of distinctions, qualifying phrases within qualifying clauses, as if each word were thinking its way toward the next. Barzun seems almost always to have thought through, in exactly the words he uses, from a premise to a conclusion either final or, with no less clarity, tentative.

Every subject permits quiet humor and almost silent irony. During the ascendancy of “scientific” scholarship, Barzun wrote in 1958, the critic was demoted as “a man with ideas, an excrescence comparable to the prehensile tail which man as fully evolved scholar had lost.” The style incorporates parody, as on the philanthropic view of education: “Patronize your local library, enjoy a museum seminar in your home, see what the zoo can do for you. You owe it to yourself to have an intellectual life—learn Russian in your spare time, read the 101 classics during the next 1,001 nights, or at least take up playing the recorder and paint on Sundays.”

Murray’s anthology displays what Barzun calls Hazlitt, “a good reader,” one “who not merely knows more than the careless or unguided but enjoys more.”

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