Prince of Humanists

by Albert R. Vogeler

A man of great scholarly renown, and now of very great age, deserves our attention as he approaches his 103rd birthday on November 30, 2010. Jacques Barzun’s books, teaching, and persona have helped to define “cultural history” in America for seven decades. I have followed his career for most of that time.

It happens that in the 1940s he participated in “Invitation to Learning,” unrehearsed dialogues on great books presented by CBS radio, and I often listened to his lively and persuasive commentary. When my high school principal suggested I read his book, *Teacher in America*, I did so eagerly, though most of it proved to be beyond me. He further suggested that I apply to Columbia, where Barzun taught. In due course I did, and was accepted. But Barzun was a historian, and I was not a history major. Though I heard, saw, and read him for many years thereafter, I was never his student. He was already a “name,” and on his way to becoming a legend.

Born in 1907, Barzun was the only child of a family of means and artistic connections in Paris during the last years of the belle époque. His father, Henri-Martin Barzun, a minor diplomat, often entertained artists and writers who were shaping the modernist revolution. After a diplomatic mission to America, he offered his son an education at what he called its “best college”—Columbia. Jacques took his advice, graduated with highest honors, and had his doctorate in history and a faculty appointment at twenty-five. His English was by then faultless and fluent, but his first two books looked back to his roots, at the history and meaning of French identity. By 1940 he had embarked on his 70-year career as a student of high culture.

Within five years he produced three important works. *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: A Critique of a Heritage* (1941) cast new light on the cultural consequences of their ideas. *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (1945) was the first iteration of his lifelong fascination with the relevance of romanticism to the 20th century—which led ultimately to his 1961 study in cultural history, *Classic, Romantic, and Modern*. And in 1945 he also published *Teacher in America*, a withering critique of John Dewey’s influence on education.
Either of Barzun’s two most substantial works, the first published when he was 43 and the second when he was 93, would have been a life’s task for a lesser scholar. *Berlioz and the Romantic Century* (two volumes, 1950) sees in the composer’s turbulent life the quintessential romantic temper. Barzun’s innovation here is a series of four “interchapters” that present the larger cultural context of the personal life and can be read as separate essays. *From Dawn to Decadence: Five Hundred Years of Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (2000) is the labor of an entire decade, but its 800 pages are far from labored. It maintains a lively narrative pace while illuminating a vast range of topics with new insights and an eye for irony and drama. A thousand sidebars present quotations from unfamiliar sources that enrich but do not interrupt the narrative. Praised widely as a masterful epic, *Dawn to Decadence* quickly reached the *New York Times* best seller list.


Barzun’s deep roots in the arts explain *The Pleasures of Music* (1951), *The Energies of Art* (1956), and *The Use and Abuse of Art* (1974). All express his concern that the arts, like science and education, are losing their meaning and value amid the conflicting pressures of a mass society. But what explains his fascination with crime fiction? *The Delights of Detection* (1961) and *A Catalogue of Crime* (1971) came as a surprise to some, but they twice won him the Edgar Allen Poe Award.

Barzun’s writing has always been admired not only for its clarity and felicitous diction, but also for its conversational tone and good-tempered persuasiveness. *Simple and Direct: a Rhetoric for Writers* (1975) was the chief of several efforts to preach what he practiced. Its good advice, copious examples, and patient explanations all lead to the truth that clear thinking is essential to good writing. And *The Modern Researcher* (with Henry F. Graff, 1957) shows clarity of presentation to be essential to the value of research. This compendious manual, the most read of all Barzun’s books, has guided students in all the humanistic disciplines.

Barzun was one of the founders of the Great Books curriculum at Columbia, and since the 1930s he has been its eloquent advocate and interpreter. But he has remained aloof from the commercialization of the Great Books canon identified with Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins. His seminar on important books, taught jointly with Lionel Trilling for twenty years, became famous in educational circles. (My wife Martha was one graduate student fortunate enough to be admitted.)

To the surprise of many, in 1955 Barzun became an administrator—first dean of Columbia’s graduate school and eventually provost of the university. He reduced his teaching but not his writing, and published five important studies before he left administration in 1968. For the next seven years, until his retirement, he held the title University Professor, Columbia’s highest academic rank.
Barzun’s personal life changed profoundly in 1979 with the death of his wife of 43 years, Mariana Lowell, a violinist and member of the Boston Lowell family, and mother of their three children. The next year he married Marguerite Davenport, a professor of English at Trinity University in San Antonio. Having lived all his adult life in New York City, his decision to retire to San Antonio in 1997 puzzled some of his New York admirers. But he was soon pictured in The New York Times happily building bookcases in his new study, and he has become an enthusiast of San Antonio’s cultural life.

To the accelerating pace of Barzun’s honors in the last thirty years (among them being named president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters—twice—and winner of its gold medal for criticism, member of the French Legion of Honor, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom) have been added spontaneous greetings assembled on the internet as he turned 85, 90 and then 95. This flood of acclamation reached a crescendo in 2007 with the website “Barzun 100.” Reminiscences and anecdotes from students, colleagues, and readers in the worlds of publishing, education, and the arts have attested to his influence and the personal affection he inspires.

On his 100th birthday Barzun observed that “old age is like learning a new profession. And not one of your own choosing.” But he has in fact followed his old profession triumphantly up to the present moment. In his breadth of knowledge and interests, grace and precision of expression, courteous and elegant persona, and unflagging (but seemingly unlaborious) industry, Barzun stands alone among American intellectuals. Vivat Jacques!