

meant, example. He gives no comfort to those who want to impose democracy on others, but much comfort to those who want to defend American democracy from any and all enemies. Jefferson, it is true, mistrusted the clergy. In this respect he was typical of his generation. But Jefferson the citizen, as opposed to Jefferson the philosopher, lived within the church. Religion and piety troubled him not at all. What he feared was the sanctimonious, intermeddling, politicized Calvinist clergy—that is, what we would today call “liberal” churchmen.

Jefferson was the advocate of a free economy, but he was not doctrinaire about it. Like all his values, his belief in the free market was balanced against other claims. He believed in economic freedom within a stable society. Malone’s chapter, “The Political Economy of a Country Gentleman,” by simple adherence to the facts, corrects four generations of distortion. When viewed “in retrospect,” he writes, Jefferson’s “reaction to the economic problems of his day can better be described as conservative.”

Jefferson championed public education, but it was not public education on the leveling Prussian-New England model that later became the American standard. The traditional classical curriculum was to be supplemented by more modern and practical subjects, but not jettisoned to make room for them. It was to be an education competitive, elitist, based on a belief in a natural aristocracy of talents and virtues. The rich would always take care of themselves. The purpose of public education was to make sure that the talented ones who appeared among the poor would not be lost. That is the exact opposite of what modern American public education aims at, for its goal is to reduce the educational level to the lowest common denominator—which, in effect, guarantees that the poor but promising youth does not learn enough to rise above his station or to compete with the privileged. “The natural

aristocracy,” wrote Jefferson, “I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts and government of society. . . . May we not even say that the government is best which provides most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?”

Dumas Malone has completed a great work—a work that is, like its subject, truthful, harmonious, balanced, fair, decorous, gentlemanly. What a rare thing for an American book in the 20th century, a book by a gentleman about a gentleman. □

## Conversing with Professor Barzun

Jacques Barzun: *Teacher in America*; Liberty Press; Indianapolis.

Jacques Barzun: *Three Talks*; Northern Kentucky University; Highland Heights, Kentucky.

by Gordon M. Pradl

Distinctions recognized force us to discriminate. Discriminations freely earned breed character, with its judgments. Character consistently demonstrated unveils wisdom. With wisdom a declining virtue these days, lost too in the end is this foundational chain. And at the heart of this great disappearing act is the erosion of our mythic imagination, which entails deciphering, compromising—but never extinguishing—the opposing contradictions of human existence that modern living seeks by denial to avoid.

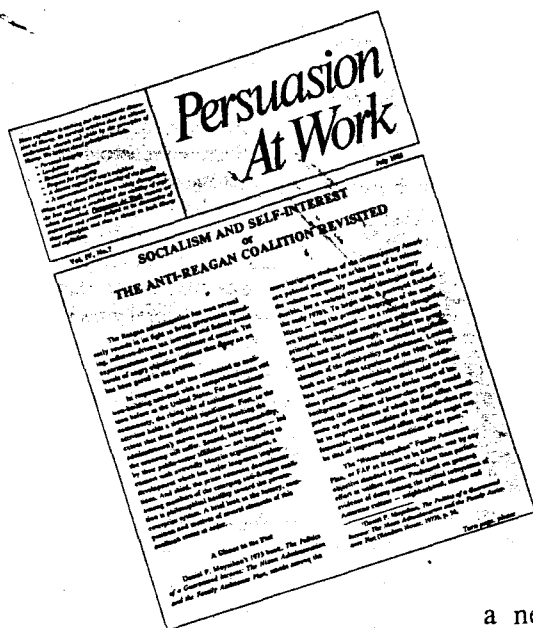
A refreshing antidote to these depressing trends is the stylish voice of Jacques Barzun, distinguished teacher and administrator, whose career at Columbia University spanned almost half a century from 1927 to 1975. Here is a man of wisdom worthy to be wrestled with because he is one who has seen what fruits can be borne from a well-placed distinction. The timely reissuing of *Teacher in America*, originally published in 1945, and the printing by Northern Kentucky University of *Three Talks* afford us the opportunity to re-

emphasize the kinds of oppositional insights across the whole spectrum of social life that Professor Barzun has been providing us with for several generations now, despite our perverse display of deafness.

Among the many distinctions Professor Barzun offers, two reveal the kind of principled judgments that tie together a lifetime of observations on the educational and cultural scene. In the first instance is the distinction between communication and conversation. Of equal importance is the second distinction between a problem and a difficulty. In each case we see his commitment to the dynamic as opposed to the static view of human affairs and interaction. And it is because Professor Barzun’s scrutiny of social arrangements is traceable to rationally held principles that his message passes beyond his own time.

The literacy issue and Barzun’s good sense regarding the nature of reading and writing is what informs the wisdom of *Teacher in America*. In the first place, our current cultural malaise is tied to “the inherent weakness of all modern literacy.” Such literacy “is half-baked and arrogant. It trifles solemnly with the externals of things, neglecting even the surfaces or the handles by which a truth may be seized: it goes like a child for the false glint or striking triviality of detail.” The schools, of course, contribute to the debasement of artistic response—a state of affairs upon which all the subversive atrocities of pop culture are based—when they separate

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learning from experience. And as Barzun emphasizes, language, especially, the mother tongue, more than any other subject, "must be learned close to its living source." Indeed the principle of proximity is so crucial for Barzun that despite its excesses he clearly recognizes the value of progressive education in this country: "... if it has done nothing else, it should be honored and given thanks for insisting on genuine, hand-to-hand teaching, as against the giving out of predigested hokum."

At the center of the kind of literacy which Professor Barzun has spent a lifetime serving is the classic, but it is the classic viewed as the repository of a living conversation, not a dead text waiting to be dissected. The classic, he reminds us, provides "examples of how to think, not of what to think." In this sense Barzun strikes the ethical note that should permeate education if it is not to degenerate into mere instruction.

It happens to be a fact that all classical works without exception deal directly or indirectly with problems of conduct. That is their great virtue for school use. Not that they teach a plain goody-goody morality, but that they show and discuss and solve dilemmas that a shipping clerk or an athlete can be made to understand. For this understanding, the discussion of any classic *must be superficial*. If you dive below the surface with your pupil you drown him. Certain teachers are always terrified of superficiality; they seem to think other teachers will scoff or that the dead author will scold. Let them remind themselves that their colleagues' profundity would strike the great author as either surface scratching or pedantry; and let them remember that for every reader this is a time when a given book is being read for the first time.

The goal of such teaching is to have the student make the work his own and in so doing instill within him a lifetime habit of responsive reading, something which the "skills" approaches to

reading (and the other disciplines) short-circuit, because they never discover and take into account the meaning intentions of the student. Basic Skills or Functional Literacy programs, then, end by being counterproductive since their strategies of fragmentation and their sterile reading materials ("Textbooks have no authors, just as it might be said that they have no readers.") fail to engage the deeper humanity of the reader/learner. The loss, both personal and social, should sober us quickly: a citizenry mired in its own narrow confines, never to be inspired in the ways Professor Barzun so richly characterizes in his stirring defense of the humanities. His words indeed bear frequent repeating:

The study of the arts in their great manifestations is thus a gradual and deliberate accustoming of the feelings to strong sensations and precise ideas. It is a breaking down of self-will for the sake of finding out what life and its objects may really be like. And this means that most esthetic matters turn out to be moral ones in the end. Great art offers a choice—that of preferring strength to weakness, truth to softness, life to lotus-eating.

Or again:

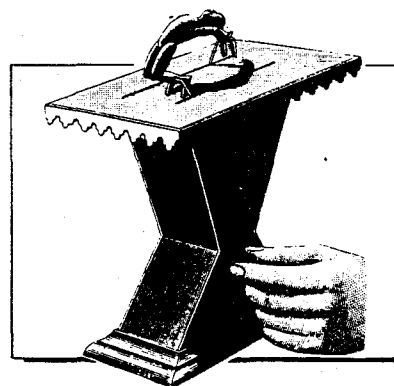
Now the reason why art is worth teaching at all is that it gives men the best sense of how rich, how diverse, how miraculous are the expressions of the human spirit through the ages. The communicative power of

## LIBERAL CULTURE

### *You've Been Had, Mr. Cagney*

James Cagney, a Hollywood icon who, for over half a century, embodied on screen the archetypal tenet of Americanism—that man can err and remain good at the core—considered himself indebted to the spirit of this country. For almost two decades he lived in retirement, occasionally voicing his disapproval of the direction the post-Cagneyesque American was traveling. His critical comments, when and if they reached the press, had an unmistakably nonliberal sound. He seemed to believe in principles which were not very much *en vogue* with the American culture of the 1960's and 70's. Recently he accepted a part in a movie entitled *Ragtime*, made from a novel with an outspoken leftist slant. By thrusting Cagney back into the spotlight, the producers and the director of the film assured themselves both prestige and money. Writing about the cinematic version of the movie, *Village Voice* praised its director with these words:

At the very least, he has now managed to wave *Ragtime* like a red flag



in the faces of the Reaganites.

*Village Voice* should know: it's the organ of cynical, best-selling anti-Americanism and well-heeled, smart liberationism. It's always on the side of "the people," who are either deviate or San Salvadorean guerrillas. We do not think that Mr. Cagney, as we know him, would be very taken with those "people," their "Village" or their "Voice," the films and directors they promote and extol. We are left with the uncomfortable impression that Mr. Cagney would have done better to read the script a little more carefully and with a more critical eye. □

artistic forms that are utterly unlike, and perhaps at first repellent to the beholder, shatters the provincial assumptions which nearly all of us inherit—namely, that our ways of speaking, singing, and feeling are the only really human ways, all others being outlandish and probably meaningless.

In light of such vital connections, every teacher of literacy needs to be viewed as a teacher of the humanities, and all teachers of English and the arts need regularly to recite the words of L. C. Knights, the British Shakespearean scholar: "We must remind ourselves that we are not specialists, but simply people who have more time and more opportunity to study what belongs to everyone."

When it comes to writing, Professor Barzun acknowledges its centrality both to learning and to the mark of an educated citizen.

Writing comes before reading, in logic and also in the public mind. No one cares whether you read fast or slow, well or ill, but as soon as you put pen to paper, somebody may be puzzled, angry, bored, or ecstatic; and if the occasion permits, your reader is almost sure to exclaim about the schools not doing their duty.

The schools have failed miserably in the area of writing for two simple reasons: frequency and proximity. First, recent studies have shown that the schools are requiring almost no writing of our children, and what writing does go on, sadly enough, is all too frequently of a copying sort. Second, writing has never been integrated with a view of the student as an active and controlling learner—a view which is needed if schooling is ever to be turned back into education.

A child should select a topic that truly engages his interest. To eliminate pretense he must be helped to do this by means of questions and suggestions. At any age, it is very reassuring to be

told that you don't really want to write about the Tariff. After two or three casts a real subject emerges, satisfactory to both parties.

And further, as Barzun notes, writing in the school must involve a collaborative effort:

... the important fact is that writing cannot be taught exclusively in a course called English Composition.



Writing can only be taught by the united efforts of the entire teaching staff. This holds good of any school, college, or university. Joint effort is needed, not merely to "enforce the rules"; it is needed to ensure accuracy in every subject.

As must now be clear, since I have been allowing Professor Barzun's words to speak for themselves as much as possible, the principle of proximity should permeate the entire curriculum, and accordingly he addresses every area—from mathematics and music to science and social studies. Such a stance returns us to his original distinction between communication and conversation, which is founded finally on a philosophy of social organization: democracy as opposed to the range of totalitarian tyrannies, from the right to the left, that unfortunately have been the continual scourge of mankind. Democracy, however, is a fragile enterprise requiring an active and reactive citizenry which, in turn, only develops

when men and women learn to interact with the sources of information, whether it be teacher or government spokesman. The perfect model for democracy is true dialectical conversation, not unidirectional communication.

... conversation is a school for thinkers and should be a school for democrats. When one finds supposedly educated people arguing heatedly over matters of fact and shying away from matters of opinion; when one sees one's hosts getting nervous at a difference of views regarding politics or the latest play; when one is formally entertained with information, games or queries cut out of the paper about the number of geese in a gaggle; when the dictionary and the encyclopedia are regarded as final arbiters of judgment and not as fallible repositories of fact; when intelligent youth is advised not to go against the accepted belief in any circle because it will startle, shock, and offend—it is time to recognize, first, that the temper of democratic culture is tested at every dinner table and in every living room—just as much as at school, in the pulpit, or on the platform; and second, that by this test and despite our boasted freedom of opinion, we lack men and women whose minds have learned to move easily and fearlessly in the perilous jungle of ideas.

Conversation properly conceived has no end because it never presumes to judge its results in advance. It thus is compatible and consistent with Barzun's other key distinction. In *Three Talks* he opposes difficulties with problems in a pointed passage on the downward spiral of our national traits.

... we have become incurable futurists. The present is not good enough for those who expect so much of innovation. Tomorrow is bound to see our problems solved, all our desires fulfilled. This euphoria in the midst of despair is not a genuine surge of power. It is a deficiency of the practical imagination, coupled with the giving up of responsibility and the vacuum of private judgment



... It is the utopian outlook and quite as obscurantist as its former opposite. Even apart from the bandwagon effect and the regrets and remorse after the defeat of foolish expectations, it has the grave defect of making one impatient with Difficulty. By difficulty, I mean the permanent obstacles to the good life and the good society. Few of them are problems in the sense in which we bandy the word around. Problems are solved and thereby removed. Difficulties remain and must be worked at forever. In a civilization rightly aware of itself, the majority are willing to furnish that work. In ours, the quest for innovative solutions, admirable in certain domains, distracts and disturbs and even destroys.

When our society totally develops a problem-solving mentality, it is ripe for communication, ripe for exploitation that would have us confuse novelty for art (a topic which Barzun explores in depth in his wise *The Uses and Abuses of Art*). Difficulty and conversation require a slower pace, one that is more in touch with the natural capacities of the human sensorium. And yet the machine runs at a faster and faster speed.

What makes the world oppressive? In one word, it is overstimulation. The demands upon our attention to trivial things that may prove fatal if not attended to are great in themselves. We are surrounded by dangerous engines that care nothing for our skin. And this familiar response to material stimulus spreads to every other kind, while the new means at our disposal multiply the effects by multiplying our contacts. The telephone, television, rapid transportation make for too many encounters, too many demands. Space and time are too full. . . . This hammering helps to explain why we fear and resent the sharp edges of things and wrap cushions of false words around them. They protect us at least in our dealings with other people, of whom there are too many with a claim on our thoughts. Overstimulation also accounts for the rush toward the cults

and cures based on deep breathing and vacated minds. The very name Transcendental Meditation is bound to be soothing to a population that has never known the privilege of meditating here and now, in the midst of life.

This overstimulation, this explosion of information and contacts, threatens to make a sham of our democracy because the managerial set begins to predominate and freedom is diminished accordingly. Professor Barzun rightly has no solutions, but his spirited pointing to our ongoing difficulties reaffirms the potential potency of our mythic imagination:

The chief of our present difficulties — one that will never go away — is how to redirect our minds to concrete experience, give up the sleazy words and the sleazy behavior they inspire, and so bend our energies once again

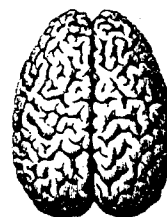
to the endless task of mending the cracks, of building and rebuilding the fabric of civilization.

But the question remains, where will the conversing public needed to complete Professor Barzun's live circuit come from, if we keep bludgeoning people with new and more glamorous stimulation while failing to lay the necessary foundations of literacy in the schools, a literacy that is needed to define what passes for life in the community at large. What hope there is, of course, will come from citizens who learn to begin with the proper distinctions, who keep the resulting oppositional tendencies clearly in mind, whatever course of action is pursued. And Professor Barzun's words, will always be there to inspire, to begin the conversation of democracy anew. □

## LIBERAL CULTURE

### *The Last Refuge of Idiots*

We received a call the other day from a frustrated European, who thought he had escaped political insanity by coming to New York City, only to stumble upon a book by a best-selling psychobiographer named Fawn Brodie. The book is entitled *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character*, and its methodology rests on the principle of explaining the former President's id by analyzing the colloquialisms he—like any other American—has used countless times every day. The authoress concludes, for example, that whenever Mr. Nixon used the verb "to kick," he thereby powerfully and irrevocably proved his own villainy and blackhearted ego. "My God!" our friend moaned on the telephone, "The book reads like the ravings of an imbecile. And it is a Book of the Month Club selection. I'm trying to get away from European morons who want to ruin NATO, and I run into this madness. And you Americans pretend to the leadership of the West. You, who once saved us from tyr-



anny and malnutrition, and still promise to protect us from communist barbarism . . ."

We made an effort to assuage his despondence by affirming that we too consider psychobiographers *au pair* with the mentally retarded. But we couldn't explain to him why New York publishers promote both psychobiography and idiocy, perhaps because we were a bit ashamed that the rascality of those publishers is so royally rewarded by the booming revenue from psychobiographic best sellers. Whatever we said, it didn't sound too convincing. □

## Roman Noir in Fiction and Life

Richard Layman: *Shadow Man, The Life of Dashiell Hammett*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; New York.

by Keith Bower

By one definition, the life of Dashiell Hammett could be said to have been a rousing success: any man who lives to the age of 67 and leaves owing the IRS \$163,286.46 plus interest need not worry about not having had some impact on the world. Hammett is chiefly credited with developing the "hard-boiled dick" genre of detective fiction, and the immortalizations of Sam Spade by Humphrey Bogart and Nick Charles by William Powell safely assure that American culture will long remember Hammett.

But the sense of failure and frustration imparted in Richard Layman's literary biography of "D. H." leads asphyxiatingly to the conclusion that it might have been better for Hammett if one of his hellish drinking frenzies had ended his story in 1933, when the last complete work of his writing career, *The Thin Man*, was published. Perhaps then Lillian Hellman, his lover and author-companion, might not have contributed to Broadway her *The Children's Hour*, but those are the things you have to sacrifice when contemplating euthanasia. Hellman's own blurry and vague reminiscences of Hammett's long decline after 1935 cloy with an irritating pathos that only a stoic from the "pity and irony" school of American letters could master. She once called him a "Dostoevsky sinner-saint," and both Layman's and Hellman's accounts of Hammett's life continually veer between those two extremes.

The real personality of Dashiell Hammett inevitably remains a mystery. As flamboyant as he was during his glory

days in Hollywood and New York, Hammett left an aura of privacy as impenetrable as Sam Spade's home phone number. The disappointment of Layman's biography is that scarcely anything of importance about this man's life emerges from the investigation.

In *Everybody's Autobiography* Gertrude Stein tells of bending Hammett's ear at a Los Angeles cocktail party in 1935. She was contrasting heroism as treated by 19th- and 20th-century writers. Hammett agreed with her assertion that 20th-century authors wrote chiefly about themselves and then added something that reveals part of the reason for the shroud of mystery around his personality: "He said twentieth-century men lack the self-confidence of men in the nineteenth century, and therefore they had to exaggerate their own qualities."

There are many vignettes of Hammett corroborating his exaggerated self-confidence: drunken Hammett emasculating Nathaniel West in front of a gold-digger at a cocktail party; tubercular Hammett fending off a rowdy Ernest Hemingway with the suggestion that he stick to bullying Scott Fitzgerald; young Hammett telling his boss at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad that he couldn't promise to make it to work on time and being rehired for his manly honesty.

Yet Layman does nothing with these incidents except to collect them for future investigators who may be willing to wrestle with the Hammett mystique. Perhaps he is wise and knows, after having shadowed Hammett through the course of this book, that there is not enough of a payoff at the end of such a chase to warrant more than the scattered, literal account presented here. Hammett's own Continental Op probably would have dropped the case for lack of sustaining collateral necessary to cover the costs of the investigation.

Still, it would be interesting if some English doctoral candidate would find

out why so many of the murders in Hammett's novels are family matters. The majority of murders are domestic in nature, but Hammett's murders are not commonly motivated. In *Red Harvest*, Hammett's first detective novel after literally hundreds of short stories, Elihu Wilson's son is unwittingly killed by the jealous suitor of the old man's mistress. Senator Henry kills his son in *The Glass Key* to prevent him from harming the local mob boss, who is expected to facilitate the Senator's next election. Guttman in *The Maltese Falcon* is killed by his gunsels, Wilmer, whom he loves "like a son," after having callously left the henchman as a sop to the police. *The Dain Curse* has Owen Fitzstephan mastermind the murder of a dozen or so people, including his cousin/lover and her husband, in order to possess their daughter



ter (his first cousin once removed).

Hammett's dark, convoluted stories offer an early warning of the breakdown of conventional Western values. Writing about the transvestitism, homosexuality and flippant promiscuity in some of Ham-

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