

exculpate the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, their tinhorn imitators, and the millions who gave their assent to crimes which they knew to be monstrous. Evil is never "banal"; only its practitioners merit that description.

Roland Hill's biography does not offer us judgments and conclusions but the rich fabric of a life and a detailed description of a past time. Acton's grave is unknown and his bones are probably in the *Beinhaus* at Teegernsee. He has, however, a better monument than an identified grave in this extraordinary biography.

Unraveling the Riddle of Progress

BRYCE CHRISTENSEN

From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present, by Jacques Barzun, *New York: HarperCollins, 2000. xviii + 877 pp.*

A MAGISTERIAL VOLUME chronicling five centuries of Western civilization provides an ideal opportunity for reflecting on the remarkable power of history to inspire and to chasten. The need for such reflection has never been greater, for contemporary thought has radically narrowed history's cultural significance, reducing it to an ideological chart, a reason for congratulating ourselves on our escape from a nightmarish past of injustice and oppression in our upward march towards a utopian future. Readers who seek a truer and more inclusive sense of history

may count themselves extremely fortunate to have a guide as learned and wise as Jacques Barzun.

This distinguished French-born scholar does, it must be acknowledged, defend progress against those who would dismiss it as a "foolish fantasy of the [eighteenth-century] philosophes," insisting on the indispensability of this "cultural yardstick." Barzun thus defends the great Whig historian Thomas Macaulay against the charge of having invented a version of history which falsified its meaning by enshrining progress as its central theme. We need this historical ideal, Barzun reasons, in order "to see that the fruits of western culture, human rights, social benefits, machinery have not sprouted out of the ground like weeds; they are the work of innumerable hands and heads."

Yet in his use of progress as a cultural yardstick, Barzun steers well clear of Whiggish complacency, consistently evincing a sophisticated understanding of the ironies and reversals which forever complicate the course of civilization. Progress, he well understands, "does not occur along the whole cultural front, though it may appear to by throwing into shadow the resistant portion." By dispelling the shadows obscuring hidden cultural developments, Barzun defies the regnant orthodoxies erected around "the 20C dogma that latest is best." Indeed, Barzun's stout defense of progress as a cultural ideal makes all the more biting his criticisms of recent cultural trends which have betrayed that ideal. "It is a false analogy with science that makes us think that latest is best," he explains, and it is accordingly not to the present age but to past times that he typically turns in illustrating just how "Progress does occur from point to point...for a given time" (emphasis added).

Barzun sees progress, for instance, in Shakespeare's poetic achievement in creating a "roundness of character" never

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before seen in the world's dramatic literature. In contrast, he deplores as anything but progress "the now standard practice of making the classic plays and operas acceptable" by "inventing travesties that will surprise and shock by a change of setting or purport." Similarly, he lauds as progress the pioneering (if not always consistent) politics of seventeenth-century Puritans who fostered "toleration of the individual conscience, linked to a new democratic right of participation in government." But he detects profound retrogression in a secularized world of "demotic egoism" in which growing mobs of "instinctive rebels," untethered by tradition or by moral principle, demand of the modern welfare state both security *and* freedom, never dreaming that their agenda is "self-contradictory and probably unworkable."

To clarify the meaning of progress within his own profession of historical scholarship, Barzun again turns to the past, hailing as an important step forward the Renaissance Humanists' development of a theory of aspect, endowing their writings with a "simultaneous perception [lacking among medieval writers] of difference and similarity between past and present." But he detects nothing progressive in the more recent "replacement of history by attempts at retrospective sociology." "Not a science and not a philosophy," he laments, "history is bereft in an age like ours which wants at least theory when science is not attainable." Since "modern theorizing" has degenerated into "the drive to defeat common sense," Barzun deeply distrusts it. He looks for nothing from it except "lax words and dim thoughts." Shrinking from "direct judgment of human beings," the theory-crazed historian retreats into this or that "voguish abstract phrase" or into the "super-abstraction of statistics."

To understand just how fully Barzun's colleagues have forfeited the possibili-

ties for real progress in their profession, we need only compare the kind of book written by the typical academic historian—clogged with jargon, numbers, and ideology—with this marvelous volume, alive with paradox and ambiguity, balanced in judgment, rich in allusion and anecdote, graceful in diction and phrasing. Too honest to play games with shibboleths, Barzun realizes that the current demand for political correctness reflects not an aspiration for cultural progress but rather the stubborn persistence of "the permanent spirit of inquisition." And in his refusal to yield to our modern Torquemadas, Barzun confidently displays a clean prose style forever impossible for those who succumb to ideological pressures. For example, despite the risk of being denounced as sexist, Barzun insists on the generic use of *man*, now unacceptable to writers who have broken with a tradition Barzun traces all the way back to Sanskrit.

More important than his resistance to this or that debased literary practice is his broader resistance to the now-regnant theories of economic and political determinism. "Ideas really exert force," Barzun avers, and he provides compelling evidence of their force over extended periods. Ideas figure prominently as parents and as offspring of the Protestant Revolution of the sixteenth century, the Monarchical Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the Egalitarian Revolution of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. As he scrutinizes each of these revolutions in turn, Barzun limns some ten or twelve themes—including Individualism, Secularism, Self-Consciousness, and Emancipation—which unify these epoch-making events. Though he wears his erudition lightly, Barzun brings an astounding depth of knowledge to the task of exposing the hidden implications of ideas. He reminds us, for instance, how revolutionary promises of freedom inevitably trans-

mute into coercion and puritanism, and of how art turns into mere commodity when "the artist must woo the buying public and keep it eager for his goods." It is this rarely paralleled depth of understanding which enables Barzun to discriminate between circumstances in which an impulse conduces to progress and those in which the same impulse yields only disorder. The cry for emancipation, for example, means progress for the sixteenth-century musician wanting to explore possibilities denied by "the rigidities of the Flemish polyphony"; however, the same cry spells only anarchy for the "20C demotic individual" who craves "the Unconditioned Life," and "who wants to act as if nothing stood in the way of every wish."

Yet for all of his skills in analysis, Barzun considers himself, first and last, "a storyteller who tries to unfold the intricate plot woven by the actions of the men, women, and teenagers...whose desires are the motive power of history." And as a storyteller, he shines: his characters stride across the pages as complex and memorable personalities, not as theoretical abstractions. Luther agonizes over the salvation of his divided soul; Mozart fashions opera into a weapon for defying the French; Proust plumbs the depths of memory by pondering a crumb of tea cake.

Barzun's imaginative engagement with his characters elevates his writing into an art, one which dispels the purblindness of modern thinkers who "trust their logic at the expense of their memory" and who therefore "maintain that history cannot be known." The past Barzun paints, peopled with men and women too compelling to be doubted, lends little support for the claims of contemporary activists that their slogans have made the present superior to all the previous ages which had not yet been enlightened by them. We may wonder, for example, just how Montesquieu's

gentle ironies could have been improved by applying modern literary theories of the Other, or how the gracefully refined Marquise de Rambouillet could have learned anything from the feminist theorists who now take umbrage at any male act of courtesy, interpreting such as a sign of condescension.

To be sure, Barzun does acknowledge the power of politics to shape culture, but he resists the contemporary temptation to interpret everything through a political lens. His narrative repeatedly highlights the power of the great painter, musician, architect, or poet to transcend the political regime under which he happened to live. For Barzun, to say of a writer (as he does of Sydney Smith) that he was "not exclusively a political animal" is to elevate him in the cultural pantheon.

Barzun inoculates his readers against the false claims of today's political ideologues not only by bringing past artists and writers to life but also by letting them die. That is, it is when one set of mortal actors must be replaced on Barzun's stage by another that we see most clearly his trans-generational standards for selection. Barzun has taken such great care in choosing out of the past his exemplars of excellence that it comes as a truly damning indictment of our age that when he comes to the pages covering the second half of the twentieth century, he confesses it "hard to find a figure of the intellectual world to put side by side with those singled out earlier." Compelled to go back to the earlier part of the century, Barzun finally settles on Ortega y Gasset as a man worthy of comparison with Pascal or Kant. For Ortega y Gasset not only traced the cultural lineaments of his own era with great acuity, but he also predicted the cultural trajectory of our own time with rare prescience.

And that trajectory can be glossed as progress only by the theory-mad and the ideologically-intoxicated. Barzun dis-

avows any censoriousness in calling ours an age of Decadence, arguing that “the term is not a slur; it is a technical label.” Nor does Barzun mean to license nostalgia toward past ages falsely perceived as idyllic times: every age, he insists, is “An Age of Troubles” to some degree. Yet his characterization of our time leaves no doubt that the cultural trends which have created it constitute a lamentable surrender of earlier achievements. A time of “paralysis in one domain—and incompetence in many,” our era can, in Barzun’s view, credibly claim progress only in science and technology. In judging all other facets of culture, Barzun joins his voice with that of Ortega y Gasset in bearing witness against decay. In politics, in literature, in mores and manners, in art, in education—everywhere he turns, Barzun confronts muddled thinking, lowered standards, group propaganda, and irreverence. In the relentless drumbeat of “the shocking, the bizarre...the repellent, the intrusively (sexually) intimate, the disturbing, and the disturbed,” he detects a barbaric cadence acceptable only to a people so inured to decadence that they “accept futility and the absurd as normal.”

Even more disquieting is Barzun’s speculative prediction—offered in his conclusion from the perspective of an imaginary historian looking back from the year 2300—of two more centuries of cultural sterility: bureaucratized uniformity, welfare-state docility, computer technocracy, spiritual lassitude. But at last Barzun does hold out hope. Eventually, he anticipates, some brave band of pioneers will rediscover “the old neglected literary and photographic texts.” These long-forgotten texts will, he prophesies, finally rekindle “enthusiasm in the young and talented” and so catalyze a “nascent—or perhaps we should say, renascent—culture.”

The hint could hardly be more direct. How do we find our way out of our cur-

rent cultural malaise? How do we rediscover the path to progress? The key lies in reclaiming the riches of our past—riches rarely laid out with greater munificence than in this very book.

Exemplar of the Humanistic Tradition

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George Santayana, Literary Philosopher, by Irving Singer, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 240 pp.*

IRVING SINGER’S *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher* provides an opportunity to reconsider the legacy of one of the greatest American philosophers almost a half-century after his death. Professor Singer himself prefers to remember Santayana “as a humanistic thinker” rather than as a philosopher in the narrow sense. In his reassessment, Santayana’s novel *The Last Puritan* (1935), his literary and art criticism, and his ideas about love and personal relationships are emphasized. Singer comments that Santayana’s observations on friendship “represent the humanistic strand that always accompanies, or enriches, his writings about either the life of reason or the life of spirit.” In contrast, Santayana’s “philosophy of love” is vitiated by his unsuccessful attempt to “incorporate the outlook of Freud and Plato.” In Singer’s view, Santayana fails to appreciate that love may be something more than either “instinctual gratification” or “sacrificial

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