Book Review

Jacques Barzun.
Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 222 pp.

In Robert M. Pirsig's new philosophical novel, *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*, Phaedrus describes how he came to realize that the scientific canons of contemporary anthropology were impervious to change (Robert M. Pirsig, *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*. New York: Bantam, 1991). Boas, a nineteenth century physicist, had switched to the emerging "science" of anthropology and wrote the seminal text that laid the demand for verifiable data and the criteria for generalization, so that now every serious anthropologist was following this scientific dogma. Everything written must follow the rules. No intuition, no values are acceptable. Those who don't follow the rules aren't proper scholars and won't be heard. So while Phaedrus, and his former colleague Dusenberry, have a great deal to say about the American Indian (including the fascinating thesis that American cultural values are a profound intermingling of European and American Indian culture), no one will take any notice. They have no audience.

However difficult we may find it, we have to try to listen to people whose views we do not like or whose styles are not our own. Phaedrus's problem is a problem for all of us in a world of mass communication. It is bestowed on us by the specialization of knowledge and its assimilation into the institutional forms of universities and schools. As administrators, scholars, classroom teachers, department chairs, or citizens, we get so locked up in our assumptions that we simply cannot hear voices (even if we were to listen to them) that start with a set of assumptions at total variance with our own. We have ways of pigeonholing such voices (oh, he's an old Deweyan, she's a feminist, he worked in New York, Cassandra always says this sort of stuff), which immediately gives us excuses for not listening. In many higher education institutions this has become so embedded that "discussion" now relates only to style, not substance. Even the gangs of sociologists who have been trying to explain these phenomena for many years are talking only to themselves (which some would say is a darned good thing).

Social and intellectual life therefore often seems composed of multiple solo voices crying in increasingly dense sets of different wildernesses. Across the education jungles and swamps, one such voice is that of Jacques Barzun. This book is a collection of Barzun's essays, lectures, *belles-lettres*, and articles in a form that might be described as the "Essential Barzun." The collection lacks the deep scholarship of his primary works (*The House of Intellect*, for example). The editor (Morris Philipson, director of the University of Chicago Press) has tried to remind us (note the subtitle) of Barzun's arguments and find a way to make Barzun's voice loud and clear in the current clamor of demands for reform in public education.

What do we hear from that voice, if we listen?

First things first. All children can learn. (p. 16) The purpose of schooling is the development of understanding (p. 95), central to which is the ability to read. (chapter 2) Testing is largely pernicious, perverting education because learners see the goal only in terms of "qualifying," rather than facing the difficulties embedded in the struggle to learn. (pp. 34, 14) Schools need *de-testing* and also must be cleansed of the gimmickry that has come to substitute for good teaching. "Ploys are the plague of teaching and learning."(p. 82) Teaching must be seen as an art and schools as ethical and moral institutions. (p. 51) "One generic confusion underlies all the particular confusions: the purpose of the school has been lost and buried under a multitude of secondary aims." (p. 59)

"Thinking is like piano-playing: it is shown, not taught." (p. 46) Barzun rejects curriculum based around so-called skills,

like problem-solving or critical thinking. His positive statements of principles on curriculum give a vital place to history. History must come alive with its essence in narrative, moving for the aging child from anecdote to continuity and combination; be driven by reading rather than activity in the field; and combine local, national, and international history within a conception of *history*. (chapter 6) That means a tradition of thought, not a collection of geographical labels (American History, World History).

In the essay "The Urge to be Pre-Posterous," Barzun sets out teaching practices that defy common sense by putting the cart before the horse (hence "pre-posterous"). (chapter 7) Look-say methods assume children are practiced readers. New Math implies a misplaced regard for scholarship. And "research": "All right, boys and girls, we'll now make a dictionary of our own" (p. 87), as if that were an intelligible exercise. Barzun finds "pre-posterism" in social studies, multiple-choice tests, and sex education. Two essentials for curriculum—rudiments and pedagogy—have, in his view, been lost in curriculum discussion. Basic arithmetical manipulative understandings have to be mastered through rote, memory, and practice, for these rudiments are the necessary foundation. Pedagogy has become so confused that hard work (as opposed to entertainment) seems to be despised as much by teachers as by children. Pedagogy has also been debased by the need to be alluring and, although it is an ugly word, it is at the core of education. "Remember that schooling should begin at the beginning and not set out with hopeful endings; that it should make use of reasons and ideas, but not neglect memory and practice; that it should concentrate on rudiments so as to give a body of knowledge to some and the foundations of higher studies to others"....(p. 95)

In spirited chapters that build on the notions of rudiments and pedagogy, Barzun defines the claims to the teaching of arts in public education (chapter 8) and portrays the basis of a common culture in his defense of the classics (chapter 10), which enlarge the spirit, are a means of rapid communication, help build one's self, and strengthen one's judgement. (Throughout the book, Barzun attacks teacher education in what has come to be a conventional way.)

So from mass public education to higher education: "Everybody knows what has happened to the university as an institution since the Second World War. It has moved from wherever it was to the center of the market-place." (p. 156) His critique of the modern university (pp. 160–162) is sustained and brilliant, all echoed by the much more recent (and therefore better known) attacks by Charles Sykes, Page Smith, and Alan Bloom among others. He denounces the muddy torrents of "re-search" bursting out from the modern university posing as scholarship. (chapter 12) He seeks to revive the university as "a company of scholars, not a corporation with employees and customers"(p. 197), and to restore conceptions of balanced and coherent academic curricula for the students. (p. 208) Finally, the object is the educated mind within a person who does not need to "have people around" but "has appropriated so much of other men's minds that he can live on his own store like the camel on his reservoir." The test of a human being's education is that he "finds pleasure in the exercise of his mind." (p. 216)

What voice do we hear? The authentic voice of "tradition," clear, internally consistent, well-grounded, reliant on the past rather than on a developed epistemology of the human mind or person. The educated person understands and believes in intellectual and moral values. He or she is, was, or will be brought up (1) in an ordered system of schooling with scholar-teachers speaking out of their own disciplines and traditions, (2) in an environment rich in books, and probably high culture, music, the arts, and theater, and (3) in domestic circumstances that at least permit and probably encourage the intensive commitment required. The custodians of this culture are primarily universities. For the democrat holding this perspective, the task of mass public education has been to find a way to enable all children to share this inheritance.

This agenda, which many of us may mourn, is not fashioned for the society it addresses. Calls for the restoration of a *status quo ante* sound increasingly archaic. Like other agenda for mass education, it

has also failed. Who's to blame? Barzun, like Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, and others know the culprits. Indeed they rattle off a list of the culpable: teachers, universities, parents, school boards etc., etc. But Barzun, like the others, tends to look myopically within the educational system alone. He does not recognize that handing on a moderately stable tradition (like the *pax romana* or the academic curriculum) seems to demand stable social conditions. In a social context where the pace of change is itself accelerating so fast, handing on that tradition, let alone preserving it, is extremely difficult. In the 1960s, Vietnam, feminism and civil rights threw education (and much else) into a turmoil from which it has not recovered. New social powers emerged. In the media, Bart Simpson now has much more power than Randolph Hearst ever had. Youth culture democratizes language and life-styles driven by immediate gratification, so that children spend more time watching TV than they do in classrooms. Traditional Mr. Chips competes with Arsenio Hall and "Head of the Class." Childhood, a state which Barzun assumes, seems simply to have disappeared (Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Doubleday, 1982).

It is hard to blame the schools for all this or to assume that they could make any significant impact.

Social conditions apart, the most important way in which life has radically changed is the development of the information age, or the knowledge-driven society. Barzun's 1969 statement that "the best reason for keeping hand calculators and computers out of the classroom is that their use leads to a know-nothing kind of ability...." (p. 92) sounds as quaint in 1991 as a 1930s film mogul prophesying the death of television. Yet central to the problems Barzun's tradition faces in curriculum is its lack of concern with the fast-running changes in employment characteristics of modern society. The terms *academic* and *vocational*, used to describe schooling orientations or university curriculum, are simply redundant for this new society.

Equally redundant is the demand of the traditional agenda that education be front-loaded, i.e., that you get equipped with education when young and then off you go down the path of life. Barzun's agenda assumes a long and happy youth leading to an academic curriculum in the university. Social conditions for many young people simply don't match those assumptions. In a knowledge-driven society, young people may need to move through an education that is predominantly a vocational experience first. Those who value high culture need to work in bringing its substance to the public by supporting the brilliant efforts of leading museums, concert halls, and some film, television, and theater.

Yet within the framework of Barzun's writings, certain educational principles stand out—whatever the curriculum young people encounter. First, his stress on the importance of difficulty is of vital importance: learning (anything) is not easy and teachers (or educational psychologists) who suggest it is are simply charlatans. Second, an educational institution is not some kind of train station. It is bounded by moral and ethical purposes and norms that its members need to understand and develop simply because adults are morally responsible for young people in their care. Third, behaviorism has notoriously infected American culture through testing in all its forms and effects. It invariably distorts curriculum. It perverts educational purpose: Getting better grades becomes as mistaken a goal as a businessman thinking the point of his enterprise is making money.

Throughout the book there is sustained wisdom and insight and much common sense. It is not intended to *help* administrators or teachers, but to make them *think*. The difficulty they will have is reconciling some of these "forgotten conditions" with the social reality they confront day by day. Until someone shows us how a traditional agenda (not simply the anointed five core subjects of *America 2000*) can be reconciled with other intense demands on the schools, the ideas may remain something of a curiosity, like the school in *The Dead Poets Society*.

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