

Teacher in America



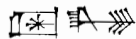
Photo by Lionel Trilling.

Jacques Barzun c. 1945

Teacher in America

Jacques Barzun

*Dulce est desipere
in loco . . . parentis.*



Liberty Fund

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The cuneiform inscription that serves as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Preface to the Liberty Fund Edition (1980)

To those who follow the news about education, the present state of American schools and colleges must seem vastly different from that described in this book. Thirty-five years have passed, true; but the normal drift of things will not account for the great chasm. The once proud and efficient public-school system of the United States—especially its unique free high school for all—has turned into a wasteland where violence and vice share the time with ignorance and idleness, besides serving as battleground for vested interests, social, political, and economic. The new product of that debased system, the functional illiterate, is numbered in millions, while various forms of deceit have become accepted as inevitable—“social promotion” or passing incompetents to the next grade to save face; “graduating” from “high school” with eighth-grade reading ability; “equivalence of credits” or photography as good as physics; “certificates of achievement”

for those who fail the “minimum competency” test; and most lately, “bilingual education,” by which the rudiments are supposedly taught in over ninety languages other than English. The old plan and purpose of teaching the young what they truly need to know survives only in the private sector, itself hard-pressed and shrinking in size.

Meantime, colleges and universities have undergone a comparable devastation. The great postwar rush to college for a share in upward mobility and professional success was soon encouraged and enlarged by public money under the G.I. bills and the National Defense Education Act. Under this pressure higher education changed in quality and tone. The flood of students caused many once modest local colleges and deplorable teachers’ colleges to suddenly dub themselves universities and attempt what they were not fit for. State university systems threw out branches in cities already well provided with private, municipal, or denominational institutions; and new creations—junior colleges and community colleges—entered the competition for the student moneys and other grants coming out of the public purse. The purpose and manner of higher education were left behind.

True, some of the novelties were beneficial. The junior and community colleges, with their self-regarding concern for good teaching, often awakened talent in students overlooked in the scramble for admission to better known places. But at all institutions, old and

new, the increase in numbers requiring expansion—wholesale building, increase of staff, proliferation of courses, complex administration, year-round instruction—brought on a state of mind unsuited to teaching and learning. In their place, the bustle became a processing and a being processed.

This deep alteration went unnoticed in the excitement of change and growth. But other influences soon made clear that the idea of college and university as seats of learning was being lost. Because of its evident social usefulness in war and peace, the academic profession after 1945 enjoyed two decades of high repute. The public no longer regarded “the professor” with distant respect for remote activities, but gave cordial admiration as between men of the world. The result was the introduction on the campus of a new standard of judgment. Scholars and scientists who had done something acknowledged by the outside world were a source of renown to the institution; they were the men who could bring home notable research projects, with money from government or private foundations; they were valuable properties like top baseball players. And since every college and university was “expanding to meet social needs,” these men were haggled over by rival places like artworks at an auction. The terms offered showed in dollars their value as bringers of prestige and in “free time for research” the new conception of what an academic man was for. In the upward bidding between alma mater and the raiding

institution it was not unusual to reach an offer guaranteeing “no obligation to teach” or (the next best thing) “leave of absence every other term.”

Thus was the “flight from teaching” made explicit and official and nationwide. It had begun well before the war, during the Roosevelt years, when Washington drew on academic experts for help in administering the New Deal. But in those early days a scholar so drafted was expected to resign his university post after a one- or two-year leave. During the war this requirement would have seemed unfair, and so the custom grew of using the university as a permanent base for far-flung excursions. The large private foundations encouraged the practice and were not resisted: how could one retain these prize men on the faculty if they were denied the opportunities of high research? A large foundation can subsidize work in ten, twelve, twenty departments simultaneously, and protest would come from them all if the policy were established of chaining the professor to the classroom. The leave of absence—the absence itself—became the sign of the really able.

This new behavior forced on the academy could be called a species of colonialism on the part of the foundations and the government. Bringing money, they obtained areas of influence and exerted control without rights; their favor was sought and cherished; and they obviously diverted the professorial allegiance from the university to the outside power. With a dispersed, revolving faculty, the institution ceased to have a recog-

nizable individual face. At the same time, the federal or foundation rules under which grants were made introduced a new bureaucratic element into the customary ways of academic self-governance. And this too changed the academic atmosphere for the worse. Under the double strain of expansionism inside and colonialism outside, the university lost its wholeness (not to say its integrity) and prepared the way for its own debacle in 1965–68.

The unresisted student and faculty riots of those years were the logical counterpart of unfulfilled promises. Brought up in the progressive mode of the lower schools, young people eager for higher learning—and others, indifferent but caught in the rush—found themselves on campuses where teaching was regarded as a disagreeable chore: students were an obstacle to serious work. Teaching was left to those few who, having seen it, still believed in it, and to those others who could not “get an offer” from elsewhere or a grant from Croesus public and private. Since such derelicts were not directing teams of research associates in studies of current social questions, or traveling on mission to settle the problems of Appalachian poverty or Venezuelan finance, there was nothing for them to do but teach. And much of this teaching was excellent, as is shown by the gratitude of many who took their degrees in those years.

But the prevailing mode was that of neglect and it bore hard on students, at a time when every kind of

desirable occupation was becoming the subject of an academic course leading to a certificate. The “credentials society” was in full development and the need for high marks and glowing recommendations was imperative. When so-called teachers left in mid-semester or steadily missed office hours or showed their lack of interest in class or conference, they bred emotions likely to explode in future. Quite apart from the threat of the draft for the war in Vietnam, student feeling by the midsixties was one of open disaffection from the university and its faculty and from the society and its culture.

These last two objects of resentment were bound to fill the student mind when their mentors were so loudly diagnosing and dosing the ills of society. As for the hatred of high bourgeois culture, it was communicated by nearly every contemporary novel, play, painting, or artist’s biography that found a place in the popular part of the curriculum. So the age was past when “freshman year” in a good college came as a revelation of wonders undreamed of, as the first mature interplay of minds.

Moreover, in the new ambulant university, what might have been fresh and engrossing was presented in its least engaging form, that of the specialist: not Anthropology as a distinctive way of looking at peoples and nations, with examples of general import, but accumulated detail about a tribe the instructor had lived with—and apparently could not get away from. At

best, the announced “introductory course” did not introduce the subject but tried to make recruits for advanced work in the field. This attitude no doubt showed dedication of a sort. It was easier to bear, perhaps, than the indifference of others who, in the name of the discussion method, let the students “exchange ideas” without guidance or correction—each class hour a rap session. But in none of these forms could the exercise be called undergraduate teaching; and its parallel in graduate school was equally stultifying to the many who in those years went on, hoping against hope, to obtain true learning from institutions claiming the title.

The violent rebels against boredom and neglect, make-believe and the hunt for credentials never made clear their best reasons, nor did they bring the university back to its senses; the uprising did not abate specialism or restore competence and respect to teaching. The “great teacher awards” given here and there only meant tokenism and lipservice and provided an ironic commentary on the reality. The flight from the campus did cease, but that was owing to the drying up of federal money and the foundations’ abandonment of world salvation by academic means. What the upheaval left was disarray shot through with the adversary spirit. It expressed itself in written rules arrived at by struggle and compromise, through committees and representative bodies set up as the arena of divergent needs and claims. Students, faculties, and administrators tried to

rebuild in their own special interest the institution they had wrecked cooperatively. But, alas, the duty to teach well cannot be legislated.

The result, fostered by a fresh wave of government regulation and supervision in favor of women and subnationalities, was predictable. Colleges and universities have become bureaucracies like business and government. To defend its life against its envious neighbors, City Hall, the state, and Washington, as well as against militant groups and individuals within, the academy obviously needs officials of the bureaucratic type; and their attitude inevitably spreads throughout the campus by contagion. In these conditions the old idea of *membership* in the university is virtually impossible to maintain. It is not compatible with corraling groups for contentious action and the jealous vindication of stipulated rights.

Nor are these sentiments sweetened by the present state of perpetual penury. Inflation makes balancing the budget a heroic annual act, which can only be done at the cost of some scholarly or educational need. Often, bankruptcy is averted only by acrobatic bookkeeping. And while the cost of tuition goes up, student enrollments go down—partly because of the population decline, partly because there are too many colleges, partly because industry and other unadvertized agencies have come to provide in many fields a training parallel to the schools'.

In this matter of enrollments, the colleges and uni-

versities were badly misled by statistics public and private. In the sixties, state and federal departments predicted a great surge of students by 1975. Many institutions responded by still more building, still more courses to prepare the future teachers of these expected hordes. Today, it is estimated that there are 125,000 Ph.D.s without a post—and many others, long on tenure, but with few or none to teach.

A great opportunity was missed after the time of troubles. Chaos and the will to reform gave the chance to recast the American college and university into simpler ways, intellectually sounder and more in keeping with its new material conditions. Simplicity would have meant not just giving up grants and foundation playthings such as “institutes” and “centers” for immediate social action, but also many ornamental activities, including public sports. Some of us who urged the move at the time were ridiculed as “scholastic-monastic,” but I accept the phrase as tersely descriptive of a still desirable direction. “Monastic” here has of course nothing to do with religion or asceticism or the muddle of co-education and cohabitation now part of campus life. It betokens merely the mind concentrated on study in a setting without frills. To rediscover its true purpose is always in order for an institution or any other being, and doing so entails scraping away all pointless accretions. It is always a painful act, but it is least painful after a catastrophe such as happened in ’65–’68.

The new direction would have had to be taken by

several institutions in concert. They would have been criticized and misrepresented and denounced in the ordinary heedless way. They might even have suffered a few lean years; but with reduced tuitions and a shorter, clearer, and solidier curriculum; with enhanced teaching and voluntary scholarship (as opposed to the publish-or-perish genre); with increased accessibility to the gifted poor, they would soon have earned respect and a following—a following of the best, by natural self-selection; after which, public support in money would have flowed to them by sheer economic preference.

Instead of that transformation we have but ruins barely concealed by ivy. For students, not the monastic life, but a shabby degradation of the former luxury; not the scholastic life, either, but a tacitly lowered standard, by which instructors maintain their rating on the annual student evaluation and the students themselves ensure the needed grades in the credentials game. For the faculty, salaries dropping fast under the inflation that also raises the costs of operation and tuition. For the administration, nothing but the harried life among demands, protests, and regulations. To expect “educational leadership” from men and women so circumstanced would be a cruel joke.

The manifest decline is heartbreakingly sad, but it is what we have chosen to make it, in higher learning as well as in our public schools. There, instead of trying to develop native intelligence and give it good tech-

niques in the basic arts of man, we professed to make ideal citizens, supertolerant neighbors, agents of world peace, and happy family folk, at once sexually adept and flawless drivers of cars. In the upshot, a working system has been brought to a state of impotence. Good teachers are cramped or stymied in their efforts, while the public pays more and more for less and less. The failure to be sober in action and purpose, to do well what can actually be done, has turned a scene of fruitful activity into a spectacle of defeat, shame, and despair.

If both halves of the American educational structure have fallen into such confusion during the years since this book came out, what is the use of reading it now?—a legitimate question, which I asked myself when the present reissue was proposed to me. As I pondered, the proposers pointed out that except for a few months the book had been continuously in print since publication in that bygone age. The fact meant that it still reached several thousand new readers each year. By this empirical test, it must have some use, though years and numbers did not tell what it was.

I can only think that the book is read because it deals with the difficulties of schooling, which do not change. Please note: the difficulties, not the problems. Problems are solved or disappear with the revolving times. Difficulties remain. It will always be difficult to teach well, to learn accurately; to read, write, and

count readily and competently; to acquire a sense of history and develop a taste for literature and the arts—in short, to instruct and start one's education or another's. For this purpose no school or college or university is ever just right; it is only by the constant effort of its teachers that it can even be called satisfactory. For a school is the junior form of a government and a government is never good, though one may be better than the rest. The reason is the same in both cases: the system must create—not by force and not by bribes—some measure of common understanding and common action in the teeth of endless diversity. A government deals mainly with divergent wills, a school with divergent minds. Both try to generate motive power by proposing desirable goals. But all these elements are fluid, shifting, barely conscious, mixed with distracting, irrelevant forces and interests. And just as there are few statesmen or good politicians who can govern, so there are few true teachers and no multitude of passable ones.

If this book serves in any degree to make these generalities concrete and intelligible, then it has value in the present, when they seem so largely ignored or forgotten. I have been told a good many times by different persons that the reading of this book helped determine their choice of teaching as a career. On hearing this I always express regret—not because I believe the life of teaching a misfortune, but because it is an unnatural life. Again like governing, teaching is telling somebody