

Jacques Barzun

The Birth of the CC & Humanities Courses

This essay is adapted from one published in the Fall 1987 issue of Columbia College Today, with the following introductory note provided by CCT editor at the time Jamie Katz.

*The College's core curriculum was inaugurated in 1919 with the course in Contemporary Civilization. In 1937 Columbia introduced Humanities A1-A2, subtitled "Readings and discussions of European literature and philosophy," popularly known as Humanities A or just Lit Hum; its complements, Music and Art Hum, came into being the same year. To the Contemporary Civilization formula – interdepartmental staffing, a canon of texts, small classes, vigorous discussion – was added another element: the insistence that students confront the great works of human imagination and intellect directly, without benefit of textbooks or critical essays.*

*In a 1946 evaluation of the Columbia curriculum issued by the school's Committee on Plans titled A College Program in Action, Jacques Barzun and Harrison Steeves '03 wrote of Humanities A:*

*"After almost ten years of practice, there seems no reason to regret the enterprise, and there has been no reason to change its initial technique. The course rests on a series of related assumptions: First, that a college granting the Bachelor of Arts degree should try to produce educated men, Second, that if educated men are those who possess an inner life of sufficient richness to withstand the slings and arrows of fortune, they*

*must have learned to feed their souls upon good books, pictures and music. Third, that the memorizing of labels, catchwords, and secondhand judgments about art and books is not educative in any real sense. And lastly, that to know and be at home with books a man must at some time or other read them for the first time.”*

*As an instructor in history in 1937 Jacques Barzun helped to formulate the Humanities program, and was among its first teachers. Now an internationally renowned historian, he has served as Dean of Columbia’s Graduate Faculties and University Provost. He is currently a literary advisor to Scribner’s in New York City and is at work on An Essay on French Verse for English Readers, to be published by New Directions. He is the author of many books on art, music, literature, history and education, and this year received the Gold Medal for Belles-Lettres and Criticism from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.*

*Professor Barzun gave the following talk on April 15, 1987, to an audience which included members of the Humanities teaching staff and the Society of Fellows in the Humanities, in the first of a series of lectures sponsored by the Heyman Center for the Humanities.*

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I remember the first days of the first class in Humanities A, which was held on September 23, 1937. How the course got established and why, is an interesting study in personal influences and cultural development. Behind the course were at least two previous innovations.

The Contemporary Civilization course, instituted in 1919, was the outgrowth of a wartime course on war issues. It replaced History I and had, in the study of “contemporary civilization” (which was defined as modern history since about 1200), the important element of ideas and

their role in the world. This was indicated by the fact that on the staff that taught CC were members from the department of philosophy. Indeed, Irwin Edman wrote the first textbook for it and Jack Randall the second. James Gutmann was a pillar of those early days.

The other course behind the movement toward the humanities program was John Erskine's General Honors course, also dating from 1919 on, which took a selected number of students from the upper two years and exposed them, through the discussion method, to a selection of great books – read, for the most part, entire. All these were great innovations in this little corner of the academic world.

But there were also things behind those courses that led straight to the study of humanities as such., Behind the CC course, I think we cannot escape seeing the towering figure of John W. Burgess, the founder of the School of Political Science here at Columbia, in 1880. His odyssey is of importance. The son of slave-owners, he enlisted on the Union side during the Civil War. When he was seventeen, on sentry duty at night in Tennessee, he thought to himself, What a stupid way to spend time and settle disputes between one side of the country and another! He resolved then and there that he would do something – he didn't know what – to put an end to that kind of conflict. The idea developed in his mind that the study of politics, of government, of popular movements, could perhaps train a group of people who, if they got into government, would go about settling affairs otherwise than by war.

He became a teacher of history and political thought at Amherst and finally decided that he must have a wider arena for his activities. He went to Europe in order to discover what was going on there, visited many German universities, and the French HauteEcole des Sciences Politiques, which impressed him a great deal, because it was at that time rather present-minded. He came back and got invited by friends on the board of trustees, to set up a school of political science at Columbia University. (It's true that he wanted to get rid of the College,

but that was only a side effect of his initiative.) What he did was to gather a small group of earnest young men, who were the first in this country to study systematically political science and government. The battle with the College had great consequences, as I shall show in a moment – unexpected as well as unintended.

The figure behind the General Honors course of Erskine's devising was George Edward Woodberry. He came to Columbia in 1891, where he soon became chairman of the department, made it over completely, and redesigned the study of literature. His notion was that great books spoke directly to the modern mind – they didn't have to be decanted through excerpts or scholarly commentaries – and would speak that way forever. He wrote a book embodying this philosophy and his own experience, *The Torch*, published in 1905. When John Erskine came from Amherst to Columbia in 1909, he had read the book and he decided he was going to do something as soon as he had a little power on the faculty. And so ten years after his arrival here, Erskine set up the Honors course which has gone on as you know, under the name of the Colloquium. (I'll explain why the change was made.)

Such were the general forces acting in the world at large behind the courses that were behind the movement toward establishing the Humanities course. Its adoption was prepared by Dean Hawkes's appointing, in 1934, a committee representing various fields. We worked for a little over a year – extremely pleasantly. I think back not to arguments or disputes or stubbornness but often to hilarious sessions. Why hilarity should have presided over the birth of this rather solemn course, I don't know. But we had a very good time.

At any rate, when we had a program – and more reasons behind it than you could shake a stick at – it was up to the Dean and the Committee on Instruction to make it acceptable to the faculty. There ensued a number of "smokers." They were carefully called that, and not faculty meetings, so that any voice vote taken there would have no effect

whatsoever on the fate of the official report. The objections were a great many. First there was the objection that another required course would limit student freedom; next, that the ambitious scope of the course would be too great a burden on freshmen and sophomores. Then, since we had insisted on small classes and the discussion method as far as possible, the cost would be enormous, Even if we had the money, who could find the proper people to do it? It seemed as if nobody for several hundred years had read these books. And to ask a young instructor or assistant professor to tackle the assigned readings that we expected the students to do was real cruelty.

There was great objection from the graduate departments. This is where an important generalization about Columbia College comes in/ Ever since the fight between Burgess and the Dean of the College, Van Amringe, there had existed a state of quasi-hostility between the College and the Graduate Faculties. It was made particularly bitter because only the members of the executive committee of the graduate departments could appoint to the College. So that one was neither independent nor dependent, but rather both. This subordinate status of the College was not something to be ashamed of, but everybody was conscious of the disadvantage of teaching in the College in one of the required courses, CC or Humanities, instead of being on the other side of 116<sup>th</sup> Street, in Kent or Fayerweather, doing really serious work under the eye of a full professor.

The handicap was, so to speak, lifelong. When the time came for promotion from instructor to assistant professor the graduate professors would ask, What has he done? Well, he has taught CC, he has taught Humanities, or he's one of those who teach in the honors course. What are those things? What do they do? I remember before I had achieved much advancement, explaining to Professor Westermann (who was not unsympathetic) not once, but five six or seven times, what the Contemporary Civilization course was. The words meant nothing. The explanations vanished into thin air. That gives you some

sense of the difficulty the Dean of the College, the head of a department (Harry J. Carman, in history), and the head of the CC or Humanities group had in trying to get promotion for the people who were doing hard work there, or to get an extra instructor, if it turned out that the registration was a little larger one year than another.

In addition to this very powerful objection from the graduate side, there was the difficulty of time. Where would we find in the students schedule, time for these courses? The unanimous answer (with a perfectly obvious exception) was, let's cut down on the foreign language requirement. The foreign language departments were naturally incensed. But they were finally persuaded that the study of foreign languages should not begin in College. If it had been missed in high school or preparatory school, it should begin in what was called extension courses – later, the School of General Studies. Also somebody invented the achievement method: You could take a test instead of two years of French or German, or both, and move immediately into advanced work.

Finally, there was, particularly from the departments of music and art history, an objection to having freshmen meddle with their subjects. At one of the smokers, I remember that Douglas Moore got up and said, "We don't want freshman wiping their feet on Bach." Since I happened to be a fairly close friend of Doug Moore's, I felt it was incumbent upon me to answer him in a way that perhaps from somebody else would have been insulting, though I wasn't pulling punches exactly. I said, "Doug, freshmen have been wiping their feet on Shakespeare for untold numbers of years." His response shows the kind of man he was: He thought for a moment and then said, "That's a perfectly good argument, I withdraw my objection." I don't believe that at any other meeting of any faculty has a member withdrawn an objection. And with Doug's enthusiastic help, the second course – one semester of music and one semester of art history for sophomores – went forward in the second year, 1938-39.

What really bothered those two departments was not mere conservatism, stubbornness or any sort of snobbery. They simply had never thought of the proper ways in which to teach non-professionals their specialty. This brings me to mention something else that you may think unrelated to the humanities, though it is not. I refer to the effort at that same time to establish a requirement of two years in science. That was much more difficult to get accepted than music and art history. Dean Hawkes was very keen about this third branch of the program, being himself a mathematician and humanistically inclined.

It so happened in 1933 James Gutmann and I had been delegated to do the periodic review of the Contemporary Civilization syllabus and readings. For reasons I don't remember, I had picked out from William James (whom I was then discovering with delight) a quotation which said that the sciences were humanities, too, if they were taught in the proper way; historically, as examples of human achievement. That epigraph to our volume of revised syllabus and readings had struck Dean Hawkes, so he put me on the science committee, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "Do what you can to get these hard headed people to come along with us on the humanistic line."

The principal member from the sciences and the most vocal was Polykarp Kusch, whom some of you will remember. There was never any hesitancy on his part about expressing the gravest doubt that course could be taught to people who were not going to be scientists, who didn't have advanced math, and who didn't have a God-given passion for a particular science. He kept referring in discussions, to the ease with which "inspirational subjects" (as he called them), such as literature and language and music and philosophy, could be taught; whereas science was serious work, very difficult and calling for a true, steady application of mind. In other words, he (in keeping with many of his fellows) thought that what we were doing on our side of the campus was a kind of light entertainment, compared to the rigorous work they were performing.

That was a very different committee from the one that established Humanities A. Some of us, one each side, got very angry. But here again, something wonderful happened because the committee meetings were interrupted by the summer. When Polykarp Kusch came back, one of the first things he said to me was, "You'll never know what I've been doing over the summer!" I said, no. He went up to Vermont and I thought he might have been fishing or something of the sort. He said, "I've been writing poetry, but you have no idea how hard it is!" I wisely refrained from saying, "I've been telling you that for nearly a year." The impulse to poetry turned Poly around. He became a partisan of what he called Science for Poets and the committee turned in a report that was readily accepted. For a good many years, the two-year requirement in science was part of the Columbia program. Meantime (beginning about '39), our ideas had spread abroad. The term "General Education" became the vogue. It was largely publicized by a sizable book, written at Harvard by John Finley – a very lyrical person in the classics department – describing how Harvard had discovered general education in all its aspects and with all its benefits. That did more to draw some attention to these subjects and these courses than anything else, though it was an outright steal and though Harvard never had general education at any time. It merely assigned existing courses to various categories, called humanities, social science, and so forth. Students were merely required to make up packages of these things, uncontrolled, of course, since Harvard professors do what they like.

Meantime, Mortimer Adler had become acquainted through a project in law with Robert Hutchins, who was dean of the law school at Yale. One thing led to another . . . Mortimer discovered that Hutchins had never read a single novel, certainly not any poetry and very little philosophy. He was the pure lawyer. So Adler began to instruct him on the lines of the General Honors course which Adler had taught in the College for several years in association with Mark Van Doren. (It was a famous section; people wanted to be with Adler and Van Doren.) When

Hutchins got the idea he took fire. Much later he told me that he had begun by reading The Brothers Karamazov, at the end of which he said, "After this, I don't see how anybody else could ever write a novel!" It seemed to him the complete conspectus of human affairs and the human soul.

Then Hutchins was appointed president of the University of Chicago. He decided, with Mortimer, that they were going to turn the place upside down and install the Great Books curriculum, which they were also working to get established at St. John's College in Annapolis.

At Chicago, there developed an extramural activity. Adler, being always full of energy, thought that the trustees of the university and the businessmen with whom they were associated would benefit greatly from reading Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Ethics. (particularly the Ethics). He set up what you might call lay groups of honors and readers and discussers. They came to be known as The Fat Men. Soon there were three or four Fat Men groups in Chicago and vicinity. I was invited to take part a number of times. The groups proliferated and the phrase "Great Books" became popular. People might not know what the great books were, but they know there was such a thing. Then others imitated the pattern in California and in the South.

So through Chicago and through Harvard, our Columbia ideas became established throughout the nation. Seeing that, I felt rather resentful that we got no credit whatsoever. So early in 1940 I went to Dean Hawkes and I said, "We ought to issue something – a book, a pamphlet, a list, a manifesto –publicizing what we do." He shook his head. Colleges don't do that. Diploma mills, yes; but colleges and universities do not tell the world, over their own signature, what they do. And I said, "Harvard has just publicized what they don't do in a brilliant and effective way." What's more, a couple of articles had already been written and published in *The University Quarterly*, published here at President Butler's insistence, for local consumption. I pointed out to the

dean that I had written up the Humanities course and Jim Gutmann the Colloquium; so that all we needed to do was to get something written on the other parts of our program and call it "Columbia College Education: The Plan of the First Two Years." He reluctantly agreed and a booklet came into being – here is a surviving copy. How far it traveled, I don't know, I had nothing to do with the distribution; it certainly wasn't for sale anywhere. But it established a small claim to the fact that we were first.

In those days it was impossible to get anything about Columbia education (or about Columbia at all) in the New York Times. That was partly due to the fact that most of the staff of the Times were graduates of our School of Journalism. They felt that the university was so well known, it was so familiar to them, that not a word needed to be said – though anything outside New York did get noticed, I remember a front-page headline on the bottom of the front page which said, "Yale men to read three books over the summer." – a mild attempt at reading whole books in New Haven! I think that news item may have decided Dean Hawkes that it was all right to publish a little self-advertisement. When we now see what colleges and universities do in the way of ballyhoo, our record does make us look naïve.

Now what favored the success of the humanist enterprise right here on our little plot of ground? I can name a number of things. First, the small size of the classes. Second, the fact that we took young, enthusiastic instructors and assistant professors to teach those sections, rather than full professors who hadn't caught the spirit of the times. I think the small size of the College itself was useful, because it meant we did not have to deal with mobs of people. In fairness to Harvard, that seems to me to have been the obstacle to their ever doing anything with general education – too many entering students: And their system of using graduate students as third-hour men and preceptors was simply not adaptable to general education. Further, we had the wisdom to revise fairly frequently the reading lists, the arrangement of this or that

portion of the course. And this we did thanks to another important feature: The staff met once a week to discuss difficulties, to exchange useful ways to teach the difficult spots.

Finally, and most important, we taught these course in a humanistic spirit; that is to say, not as scholarly disciplines which would make of every member of the class an economist, an historian, a musicologist, or any such thing. That, it seems to me, is a sign of our merit and clue to our continued success. It is this simple idea that has not been understood by most universities and colleges in the country. When you read, either in educational journals or in the public press that the liberal arts are in danger or the humanities are sinking (which they do year in and year out, as far as I can remember), it is because , on the campuses, where this diagnosis is made, people are attempting the impossible task of having the liberal arts and the humanities subserve scholarly, technical requirements.

The notion I am trying to make clear is implicit in one of the original objections. Some people in the classics department said, for example, "But how can they read Plato's Republic and The Symposium in two weeks? And what ideas will they get about this, that or the other important matter?" The answer was, "Plato's Republic has to be read at some time for the first time. Maybe after that first time they will go on into your department and read Plato, paragraph by paragraph, under your tutelage. But first they must get some idea that there is such a book – which, after all, was written for readers and not professors."

So it was a willingness not to make exact scholars in the multitude of topics covered by these composite courses, the willingness to have them do something for the first time imperfectly, and to be taught by people who were not experts in that particular subject.

Indeed, it was a criterion of the fitness for the course to be willing to withhold a good deal of one's own technical knowledge. I remember the first time that Gilbert Highet was asked to teach a Humanities

course. Word came back (to whoever was director then) that the session would be interrupted by Gilbert's writing on the board Greek words and their etymology all the way back to Sanskrit. The freshmen were appalled; they couldn't even read the Greek letters. What followed shows how we succeed on these occasions: a kind word was said to Gilbert by somebody who was close to him. He saw the point and taught the humanities in a humanistic manner, with not a thought of Sanskrit. "Humanism in the humanities" is the slogan that makes these courses work.