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ETIENNE BALAZS (1905-1963)

An Appreciation

The world community of Chinese scholars suffered a tragic loss with the sudden death of Etienne Balazs. Born in Hungary, educated in Germany and France, he had become during the last twenty years a pivotal figure in the study of Chinese thought and institutions. Much of his life was a bitter struggle for survival amidst the political upheavals of Nazism and the Second World War. It was only after the war that he found a secure and honored position in the newly formed Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne).

Balazs' studies of China were remarkable in many ways. One was his ability to work alone, often in difficult circumstances, on important but neglected problems. His dissertation on T'ang economic history published in Berlin in 1931-32 was the first systematic study of any period of Chinese economic history to appear in the West. It was a notable achievement, lucidly organized and written, showing the sure sense for key problems that was to inform all his work. Yet when this study appeared, Chinese scholars were just beginning their explorations of economic history, and the major writings of Kato Shigeshi and his successors were still in the future. Again, his articles on the intellectual history of the late Han and the age of disunion were pioneering works; they analyzed the leading figures and the major issues of China's second great age of intellectual ferment, and they were written before he had learned of the new studies of this same period by scholars of China's wartime universities. In these and all his studies, he showed a sure grasp of the most difficult texts, remarkable powers of analysis, and an impatience with ornamental erudition, with what he called "disquisitions on philological trifles, expensive trips in abstruse provinces, bickering about the restitution of the names of unknown persons and other delightfully antiquated occupations."

The most striking characteristic of this man was perhaps the master quality of all great students of civilization: deep engagement with life, with the human situation. Wide reading, of course—the ability to draw on Dostoevski, Valéry, Silone, and Schopenhauer—but more than this, a vital concern for the present and future of men. For Balazs, the bureaucratic traditions of China were clearly

keys to the understanding of a civilization, but for him they also cast long shadows forward in time, providing hints and warnings to twentieth-century man as he turned more and more of his choices over to the managerial state. Throughout Balazs' life, Western man was in a prolonged crisis of conscience—a crisis which Balazs not only observed but experienced. This gives to his studies of Chinese thinkers—facing the crises of their times, impaled upon their terrible dilemmas—a dimension of compassionate understanding. Throughout his life, the abuse of absolute power was the malign specter that haunted the present and the future of men everywhere. When he contemplated the Chinese state, he searched for the realities of power behind the imposing institutional edifice and the bland façade of literati myths; he was not a polemicist, nor a preacher, but he wanted to show how power had been used for what human gain and at what human cost. For all his meticulous scholarship and intellectual discipline, Balazs was a poet, a man richly endowed with the tragic sense of life.

Members of the Association will remember his appearance at the Plenary Session in Boston in 1962. His one visit to this country was, like all his journeys, a voyage of discovery. These lines from a letter written on his return to France suggest the human qualities that informed all his work and endeared him to his friends:

. . . we took the Trailway to New York and enjoyed it very much, the station with the cars leaving every five minutes to Baltimore, New York or Talahassee, the warning inscriptions about no discrimination, the composition of the passengers, and above all the approach of the monstrous metropolis all lights on. . . . In between official duties I continued my apple-pie studies, visited book-shops, rode in the subway, lunched with Bielenstein and Burton Watson, said hallo to the skyscrapers and the United Nations, visited Harlem and heard Art Blakey and Dizzy Gillespie, and talked, talked with friends. The finishing touch of the tiresome but wonderful journey had been to discover providence's special attention for me. Of all the apartments of New York we stayed in the one where Bartók lived and died.

A year before his death, Harvard and Yale had agreed to sponsor the publication in English of a selection of his articles. This volume, to be called *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy: Variations on a Theme*, will appear in the autumn. We hope it will serve as a memoir of a great man and a great scholar, a reminder to us and to our students that our studies of China will be neither valid nor enduring if expertness in research is not wedded to a deep engagement with the human problems of our time.

ARTHUR F. WRIGHT

Yale University