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“The Written Word: Antidote to Number”

Jacques Barzun

Portland State University

August 1959

PSU Library Special Collections and University Archives

Oregon Public Speakers Collection

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[program begins at 00:00:05]

SPEAKER: We're very fortunate in having Professor Jacques Barzun, widely known as a scholar, teacher, and author. Professor Barzun was born in Paris, and spent his early years there and got his basic education there, which probably is one reason why he writes so lucidly. He came to New York and entered Columbia College, and graduated at the head of his class, and then he was appointed an instructor at Columbia and has moved up ever since the usual rungs of the ladder, and is now Dean of the Faculty and Provost of the University and he told me at dinner, it's quite a job, with a 15-million-dollar annual budget.

Professor Barzun is probably best known around here for his book *Teacher in America* which, amazingly enough, came out in 1945, and I think it's just as timely as if it came out this year. His other books include *Of Human Freedom*, 1939; and the much better-known *Darwin, Marx, Wagner*, 1941; *Romanticism and the Modern Ego*; *God's Country and Mine*, and in '56, *The Energies of Art*. Before that, he wrote the stupendous two-volume work *Berlioz in the Romantic Century*. I asked him how he has time to be Dean of the Faculty and Provost and write all these books, 'cause that's a secret I'd like to know, and he said he doesn't have to have much sleep.
[audience laughter]

His latest book, *The House of Intellect*, is at the top of the best-seller list, and has been for 3 months, which I think is a wonderful feat, and he's gonna talk to us, I think, on a challenging topic: "The written word: antidote to number." I'll repeat that, because he's very precise about the title, and I think it has deep meaning: "The written word: antidote to number." I'm very happy to introduce Professor Jacques Barzun. [applause]

[presentation begins at 00:02:17]

JACQUES BARZUN: Ladies and gentlemen, I must ask your indulgence tonight, for speaking to you on a topic which is not fully worked out, though it is written out. It is not fully worked out because the ideas that cluster around it are new, I think, and they are new because the situation to which they refer is new. And I thought that, perhaps, the more appropriate way of dealing with such a state of affairs would be to prepare the organization and speak impromptu. But it then occurred to me that, to talk about the written word, and not to have a written text, might strike you as paradoxical, if not insolent. And that is why I have written out something about parts of which I am not fully certain. But there will be opportunities for you to challenge me after I'm through speaking, and we shall then see whether we can't make the subject progress a little.

It is, as you've gathered, the subject of language. And language, the question of language, has by now I think become a public issue in the United States, and in several countries of Western Europe. The concern about language usually expresses itself in demands for a better teaching of the mother tongue in the schools, and less often in surprise at the difficulty of teaching a foreign language to those ignorant of their own. What is usually complained of is the inability of a high school graduate to write in clear and simple words, and of the stenographer to spell her employer's confused and complicated ones. Now, this agitation is obviously important and of immediate practical import. It looks for results, and knows what these should be. Most people would be content with improved performance in spelling and grammar. But I see little evidence that those who are alarmed perceive as yet the full extent of the linguistic breakdown that is occurring in Western civilization. And they seem to me, at any rate, entirely unaware of its consequences for the inner life of man. It is, therefore, of this breakdown and of these consequences that I want to speak to you tonight.

Not that I regard as negligible the ineptitude of what our schools call the English language arts, or the futility of freshman English in college. But I should like to have you regard these gross deficiencies as part of a still greater degeneration, which is due to causes that lie deep in our present mode of life; due to the way we use and look upon our minds; due to what we expect and fail to expect from the world and from our fellow man. In a word, it is the relation of

language to the intimate self, and the institutions of the 20th century that I want to discuss and, particularly, the written word. I say the written word because one of the linguistic traits of our time is a desire to abolish the difference between spoken and written language. And again, I am intent upon the written word because the loss of power over the mother tongue is most marked in the educated, in those who know enough to be the guardians of language. The men and women who write habitually, professionally, whether to publish or broadcast or in some other way conduct the important affairs of the republic. And, of course, in scanning their performance, I am not looking for style in the honorific sense, but only for the minimum requirement of discourse; namely, the power to achieve what most writers fondly hope is communication. But I look in vain, and the acknowledged existence of a problem of communication suggests that the root of the trouble may lie nearer home than the educated imagine. So I repeat, if language today is in peril, as such, it is not because of barbaric ignorance at the bottom of society, it is because the spirit of surrender exists in the mind of the articulate. Language is dying at the top.

[00:07:36]

No doubt you want to know what facts and reasonings support so severe a conclusion. The premise from which I start, and which I hope you accept, is that language is a convention. A convention for putting into other minds something that is in our own. And to do this satisfactorily requires a relative fixity in the symbols agreed upon. So, it follows that if the meanings of words, the form of idioms, the devices of grammar, change at the whim of the user, the convention is, to that extent, broken. And the result is doubt, ambiguity, and confusion in a realm where certainty is always desirable, and always difficult.

That is why, in considering the state of the language, one must look not only for the immediate breach of the convention, but also for the permanent damage done by the clumsy misuse, or the arbitrary distortion. The harm of the misuse goes beyond the moment, in that it creates difficulties to the next user, for language is a whole, sensitive to the local injury, which may spread by imitation. And hence, the folly of the modern grammarian who says "Never mind the rules, just get your meaning across." This blind encouragement to heedlessness leads to calamities that neither the reader nor the writer can foresee.

What is the evidence for this? Well, if you're at all concerned with precision, and ease, and naturalness in your own speech, and if you will take pains to notice, from time to time, the words that issue from your mouth, as well as the thoughts leading to their choice, you will, I think, discover that you are much too often beset by ridiculous doubts about the meanings of words, and that you are much too likely to utter un-English, un-idiomatic nonsense. And what

you speak, you write. This is continually happening to all of us, though we may have grown callous to it. The immediate cause is that, within the last 15 years or so, dozens of words have lost their common denotation and acquired no clear new one, nor any useful extension of the old. Such words as “connive,” “disinterested,” “delineate,” “vital,” “volatile,” “basic,” “drastic,” “cohort,” “graceless,” “infer,” “facilitate,” “feasible,” “format,” “purport,” “presently,” “momentarily,” are just a few of those that once possessed unique and delicate meanings now lost. They cannot be restored. To take one example, it is now impossible, without laborious explanation, to express, in English, the idea of “connivance.” That is, a willing acquiescence, and passive participation in a misdeed. The convenient word that used to do the work has been debased, to mean nothing more than “plotting” or “conspiring.” And weaker, still, in the adjective form “conniving,” it vaguely suggests “underhanded” or “suspect.” The word is useless. With each loss of meaning, moreover, the sense of a word’s proper place and function grows dim, so that language becomes a collection of freely interchangeable parts. Four or five different words are used as if they were one. Here’s the opening sentence of an editorial taken from an academic publication:

[0:11:53]

“Recently, a writer in the *New York Times* purported that there were three types of President.” When “purport” comes to mean nothing more than “say,” or “suggest,” the proper way to connect it with other words is first disregarded, and soon forgotten. I purport to you that you should desist. [laughter]

[clears throat] Here, then, are three large consequences of misuse. The blurring or total loss of ideas through the misuse of the unique words that denoted them. The piling up of duplicate words, which some people use so indifferently that others, hampered by their education, are bound to misuse, to misunderstand. And then, the blunting of what the Germans call [...], which is the sense of how the words of the language should be coupled: the alliances among them that may be made, or that may not. That last deficiency argues a kind of anemic tolerance, which leads directly to a lowering of the powers of thought itself. I have, here—I brought it so you wouldn’t think it was imaginary—a reply postcard which I received from META, the Metropolitan Educational Television Association of New York. It was sent in the usual way, for the convenience of those invited to a gathering, and it offers a printed choice of two replies: One is, “I accept with pleasure.” The other is, “I sincerely regret the META invitation.” [laughter]

Well, the failure of thought here is too obvious to analyze, but the error shows that making oneself understood is not enough. No one receiving this postcard misunderstood META. What, then, is reprehensible? Not, as is supposed by the modern *laissez-faire* school of linguists, the

abstract offense against the purity of the English tongue, but the practical injury done to the word “regret.” I find that I cannot forget the misuse of that word. Many of you also, now that I’ve mentioned it, will remember it. The word has begun to be made unfit for general use. And, while we’re being self-conscious, I urge you to ponder a little the word “sincerely,” thrust by META upon a group of unknowns, many of whom must have, in the nature of things, have insincerely, but cheerfully, pleaded a previous engagement.

Such reflections would soon take us into the depths of modern life, and make us wonder why we yield to the monstrous thoughts and feelings that our language betrays. But I first want to illustrate another class of these, namely, the decay of idiom, which is often tantamount to the death of sense. Here, again, we observe that it is the professional and the learned who lead the way to defeat and anarchy. Last April 23rd, the *New York Times* announced, “Bolshoi dancers plan a postman’s holiday.” And a little earlier, and speaking of a young boy chess champion, a reporter wrote, “His mother forbade him from playing chess until his marks improved.” Lest you think that these are isolated blunders, let me assure you that they are daily occurrences. As the *Times* itself acknowledges, in its house periodical called “Winners and Sinners,” which is compiled by the assistant managing editor, presumably the one member of the staff who is delegated to know the English language. [laughter]

And yet, the *Times* writers are chosen for their uncommon talents and training, and what they write under pressure is revised by experienced desk men, who are not under the strain of gathering the news. So, if this group steadily flouts idiom, it must mean that the collapse of this linguistic device is a general phenomenon. I chose a leading American newspaper for convenience, but you may take my word for it that other public prints, and other nations—England, France, Germany, Italy—are similarly afflicted. The falling-off of idiomatic speech means the rejection of an indispensable shorthand for thought, because by using illogical or often literally un-meaning combinations of words, idiom furnishes a great range of subtly differentiated expressions not otherwise available. And they’re particularly useful for rapid communication. So, to damage or destroy idiomatic form enfeebles speech, or leads to self-defeating blunders, as, when the selectman of a New England village posted a sign on the highway which read, “You are now entering Westwood, and are welcome to it.” [laughter]

[00:17:56]

It is bad enough when professional writers and public officials mistake the fundamental forms of their own language. It is lamentable when the teachers and the learned rejoice in the confusion. For example, a lady in distress writes to ask my advice, or rather my support, in an argument on this very point; she says, “Recently, I was trying to convince a college professor in

creative writing that our current use of language was sloppy and actually poor. And he said that was nonsense, that I was old-fashioned and stuffy. Our language, he said, was more alive than ever, because of the use of words like “-type” and “-like,” which we can tack onto other words, and because of the omission of the definite article, and of unnecessary propositions, such as, ‘He plays piano,’ ‘She graduated college.’ I said that, if we talked that way, we would begin to think that way, and his attitude was, ‘So what?’” This college professor cherishes his own pidgin, but he stays within the limits of the intelligible.

On a higher plane, these limits are transcended, as I know from sitting on the publication committee of a university press. There, not long ago, a report was handed in on a scholarly translation, and it contained this revealing sentence from the expert who had been asked to read the manuscript: “There is little utility in a translation,” he said, “if the reader is to be driven back continually to the original to find out what the translation means.” [laughter] In examples such as this—and they’re not uncommon—the acme of verbal unconsciousness is reached. The point where words are set down, one next to another, without concern for their joint effect, or their internal coherence. The written word is no longer a symbol dependent upon on a convention. Rather, it’s an absent-minded ritual which corresponds, perhaps, to some unrealized daydream. And the question arises, “How did we—the inheritors of a long tradition which is nothing if not articulate—how did we get into this condition of second childhood?”

The state of the language and the state of mind which daily worsens it are the product of many influences that have been acting on Western civilization for the better part of a century. It hardly matters which influence we name first, since they converge and supplement and overlap each other. But we may begin with the paradoxical results of increased literacy, which followed the spread of the Industrial Revolution. The new social classes that were taught to read and write in the [18]70s and 80s soon constituted a public for which a new sort of newspaper was invented. Writers for these newspapers thought that they should simplify the literary language; they tried to reach the mind of the newly- or poorly-taught by affecting an especially colloquial tone. This was not the native tone of the previously illiterate farmer, the factory hand, which had maintained, for centuries, a directness and a simplicity all its own. The new vernacular was artificial, it was condescending, it was pretentious, it misapplied technical words of which it was very fond, and sought continual excitement. It justified the new name “journalese.” That was one influence.

But, to this vulgarity, there soon occurred a violent reaction in the camps of literature. Beginning also in the 70s and 80s, poets and novelists developed what they called the “artistic style,” in a deliberate effort to make a gulf between journalism and literature. The poets of that

period went farthest, and marked a distinction between poetry and all other writings by distorting grammar, syntax, and meaning. Some writers made the contrast even more vivid by juxtaposing the colloquial and the *recherché*. Now, if you reflect a moment, this combination of the *recherché* and the colloquial has remained the dominant one in our Western literature. All you have to do is to consult the representative works of Eliot and Joyce and Auden and Faulkner and Yeats, and we, who read and write, are the babbling imitators of this aesthetic, which is based on doing deliberate violence to the conventions of both usage and propriety. Indeed, one doesn't have to examine the poets or the obscure prose writers of today. One has only to go back to a pair of classics, who were contemporary with this movement, who are congenial to each other: Henry James—the late Henry James—and Kipling. In their work, you will find a striving after a sort of superior efficiency, by interweaving the precious and technical with the colloquial and the metaphorical in such a way as to undermine the idea of prose.

I would ask you to stop a moment over this last phrase, *the idea of prose*. The idea or principle of prose is that there is a medium for exposition which is not so free and condensed as poetry, not so careless and fragmentary as ordinary speech. Prose is the written word, as against the spoken word of conversation, or the sung rhythms of poetry. When I think of prose, I share the surprise and the incredulity of Monsieur Jourdain, who was told that he had spoken prose all his life. In my definition, he had not, and his teacher was misleading. Even if you dispute my definition, you cannot help finding in our traditional literature a form of expression which, at its best, may sound as if it could be spoken, but which is, in fact, far more exact and controlled, far more lucid and ordered than even the best impromptu speaking. If you do not believe me, read the transcript of any taped, recorded discussion.

Our contemporary language, then, is one that has abandoned the idea of prose in favor of colloquialism, technicality, and the images of poetry. And it's no wonder that we find it hard to use words at once simply, and with propriety. But what are the motives that impel us towards these marginal and eccentric vocabularies and ways of speech, when art is not our aim and certainly not our excuse? To take the colloquial first, I think we can assign its vogue to the democratic, egalitarian impulse. Nowadays, no one wants to talk like a book—not even a book. Everybody tries to catch, or to invent expressions that will stamp him as a common man. Thus, the Public Transit Authority in New York addresses its customers through an imaginary character called Charlie Dooley, who signs the company's posted announcements. A recent one of these read as follows: "If me and you don't keep the city clean, who is?" [laughter]

[00:26:53]

After this had appeared, someone wrote to the *Times*, protesting against what he called the cheapening of the language, and arguing that no one really spoke in this fashion that was at once crude and coy. To this, Charlie Dooley or his ghost-writer replied that if the objection were true, he would indeed be cheapening the language. But, he went on, "suppose there's a whole lot of people who talk just like that. Then, is it right to have me say it? Seems right to me, maybe I'm wrong. Now, what probably happened is Mr. [...] never met anybody like this yet, but I met them, I know them, the whole neighborhood." Since you haven't this document before your eyes, you will excuse my pointing out its defiance of prose and the incomplete sentences, the weak, inaccurate verbs, the breakdown of tenses, and the contradiction between the writer's plea that he writes to suit his audience, and his failure to do so when addressing an educated objector.

[00:28:04]

We may seem, here, at a great distance from the second, or, mixed technical and poetic influences. The defiance of prose that comes to us from the other mood, originally expressed by Rimbaud and Eliot and Joyce. In actual reality we are not very far, provided we are willing to leave the subway and take a taxi. For, in that vehicle, the eye is drawn to an ad, and the mind hypnotized into reading these words: "See how Pall Mall's famous length of fine tobacco travels and gentles the smoke, makes it mild but does not filter out that satisfying flavor. Outstanding, and they are mild." I submit that the idea of poetry governs the form of that statement. In prose, no length of anything could be said to travel and to gentle smoke. But it is an admissible telescoping of images of the kind that Shakespeare is master of. And, again, the illogicality of "outstanding, and they are mild" is a poetic effect, repellent to the spirit of prose.

This does not alter the fact that our best writing talents today are probably to be found among advertising copywriters. That they write nonsense without conviction, and dignify with specious images, subject of little worth, does not prevent them from being adept with words and greatly influential. Addressing the people as they do more continually than any other group of writers, they have set the tone of our written and spoken language for every occasion. That tone, I repeat, is the metaphorical. And by its intention, it resembles, or it includes the technical. Because, in both of these ways, it makes a point of what is special. So, once more, it is anti-prose, anti-convention, and anti-communication. Whether invented or borrowed, the metaphors are used fraudulently to give an external liveliness, to gloss over, to cajole. And these purposes are more and more compelling as more and more persons are at the mercy of group opinion, or the opinion of superiors whom they try to distract, so as to manipulate that opinion.

[00:30:51]

We learn from an article on the language of the movie industry that its jargon is “vital and ambiguous.” “Vital” is misused here to mean “indispensable,” but “ambiguous” means “ambiguous.”

“A man,” the article declares, “must know how to express his opinion in such a way that, no matter what happens to a movie, he will not be blamed. To do this, one of the vital metaphors is ‘built-in values.’ This may mean that the movie has anything from Marilyn Monroe to the approval of some women’s organization. Then, if the movie fails, it was because these built-in values were not handled properly. And, again, since it is almost suicidal to claim that a movie will have artistic merit, a substitute must be found. One way to say it is that it has ‘chemistry.’”
[laughter]

You may retort that in all times and places, euphemism has served diplomacy, and trades have developed special vocabularies. But our present mania for metaphor in no way resembles these natural and necessary growths. Rather, we continually make up new expressions for things already named, as if we could not bear the reality which the older words are perfectly able to convey. In a recent issue of *Time*, for example, my eye fell on an article about the steel strike. This is what I read: “As the U.S.’s basic industry last week shuttered up the mill that produced the bulk of its steel, the broad-based U.S. economy was so sound in its non-steel elements that it suffered few serious effects.” What a collection of false images and uncompleted ideas. Steel mills that close down do not put up shutters like pawn shops—why not say “shut,” or “closed”? Why “shuttered”? And try to conjure up the rest: “broad-based,” “sound in non-steel elements,” “serious effects,” as against frivolous effects. All of which leads to a further jumble where we’re told that each week of the strike will siphon off from this broad-based abstraction two million tons of steel. That is to say, will draw off through a tube some heavy solids which do not exist, since the strike will prevent their being manufactured. [laughter]

This fanciful way of putting simple things isn’t found only in our most nervous magazine. [laughter] The one predictable trait of graduate students who begin to set down the results of their research is that they cannot write un-metaphorical prose. They consequently lay themselves open to humiliating questions as to what they mean and what they know. And notice, also, in business and other conversation, the compulsive use of far-fetched metaphors for common events, and the rapid rate at which these phrases succeed one another. For example, people do not say that they are embarrassed or that they want to apologize, they say, “My face is red.” In the publishing world... [tape cuts out with a two-second pause; some of the

presentation may be missing] ...the rest is pseudo-jargon, made up at the whim of the writer, cutting him off from communication and also from criticism. [laughter]

Isolation of this kind is so far recognized that editorial services flourish on the confusion caused by these alien tongues. One such firm states in its prospectus that textbook publishers are becoming more and more interested in having certain manuscripts put into clear and readable language of a quality that can hardly be expected or required of a person who should write a book, because he is an authority on his special subject. [laughter] That sentence itself gives little assurance about the quality of the prose... [laughter] which will give shape to the subjects and to the students' mind through the textbook. Then, as I said before, mutual contamination is inevitable. And, when the authority is illiterate, it may be wise for the student to be, also. [laughter]

The excuse of "specialism," which we have just met, brings us by a natural progression to the role that science has played and is playing in the linguistic debacle which was begun by colloquialism and carried on by loose technicality and false poetry. But before science could affect our verbal ways at all importantly, earlier ways had to be wholly eradicated. I refer to the simple familiarity with right and wrong usage, right and wrong idioms, which used to be second nature to educated minds. How did it come about that the reporter I previously quoted confused "busman's holiday" with "postman's holiday"? How could he be unaware that the word "forbid" is not construed with the preposition "from"? By what process does a young writer who thinks that she is in the vanguard of literary creation come to use "cohort," the name of a Roman regiment, to mean "a companion," or more exactly, "a sidekick"? [laughter] The multiplication of these errors in such places yields the answer that we have, once again, become a civilization that learns chiefly through pictures and the spoken word. By providing means of information and of entertainment that are less taxing than print, we have reverted to something like a pre-Gutenberg condition. [laughter]

The very term "audio-visual aid" implies that bare words in black and white are inadequate to stir our imagination. And certainly, one rarely finds nowadays the adolescent child who is a devouring reader. Yet, without extensive reading, it is difficult to acquire the bias for words, the familiarity with idioms, the delicate touch to discriminate among synonyms, or even the habit of taking in what is said. Busman, postman, coworker, cohort, it is all one to the modern listener. The drift suffices. You shall soon see why. Add to this, the effects of increased travel, the mixing of populations, the readiness with which foreigners mangle and misconstrue the languages that they adopt, and you have the favoring conditions for the linguistic philosophy of "anything goes," which is the mark of our scientific culture. I mean by scientific culture one in which the ideals and the trappings of science have been widely diffused, an important

consequence being that today, readers of both common and abstruse print, specialized works, are persuaded that, at bottom, words do not matter.

[00:39:22]

The truth, they think, the real truth—the “true facts,” as they’re likely to say—that which is verified, reliable, scientific and objective is expressed in number. Words on the page are opinion; words in numbers, words in graphs are findings, data. The permanent and real transcribed for our use. That is the fundamental belief upon which we base our view of ourselves and of our fellow man. It is the belief by which we regulate the events of our consciousness and our existence.

Just as earlier savages attributed to words and names magical powers which protected them and gave them control, so we, after repudiating the rational power of words, have given our lives over to the magic of number. This shift of faith is so palpable on every hand that I needn’t illustrate it; I can merely point to the evidence. We denote, describe, and judge innumerable things by number. What is the meter reading? What percentage did it come to? I want a number six. Whereas 52 applied last year, we find only 45 now. The ratio is, the odds are, and it is always only a fraction of what we expected. All the important and desirable characteristics of men and things are steadily being reduced to formulas, indexes; that is to say, numbers. And some of these do indeed represent the innumerable units of matter, which are very useful. But many, many more are indirect and uncertain attempts to reduce quality to quantity.

Nor is it these efforts themselves that constitute the main proof of the profound cultural change I’m speaking of, but rather, the readiness with which we’re governed and overawed by the numbers so produced. Take any group charged with the selection of a candidate for a place. No amount of any direct verbal testimony for or against him will have the weight that is attached to the figures, percentiles, and ratings on his record. No one present knows the source or the accuracy of these figures. It may be that some hasty respondent to a past questionnaire placed the man in the top ten percent of those possessing some ill-defined virtue like leadership or cooperativeness. But that figure, and especially a set of such figures, will be taken as solid evidence of merit, stronger than any verbal estimate. And the more conscientious and educated the judges, the more susceptible to the eloquence of numbers. It’s only fair to add that the verbal descriptions and the letters that accompany the fanciful percentages are probably unimpressive. They’re usually fragmentary, written in clichés, and disclosing no force or penetration of judgment. But that is only another symptom of the change I’m discussing: the atrophy of the verbal powers.

[00:42:56]

We took note earlier of the misuse of language; now, we observe the increasing occasions for its *disuse*. And the cause is not simply infatuation with a novel means of expression. The articulate minority that formerly commanded the word have been taught, deliberately taught, in the name of science and wisdom, to distrust everything that they knew through words. From one side, the semanticists demonstrated that words are slippery, ambiguous, liable to abuse. They recommended continual definition of a safeguard, almost as if to prove the uselessness of words, for the remedy of perpetual definition is surely worse than the disease. From another quarter, the so-called scientific linguists declared that language was a free, living thing, which properly revealed in confusion and ambiguity. Normative grammar was sinful and must not be taught in the schools, and the approved scientific grammar, which merely reported popular usage and misusage, easily showed that words had no fixed meaning. So, the human animal was supposed to struggle along as best as he could, with incoherent cries or improvised meaning, and this was acceptable because he could now rely on number for the really important decisions in his life.

So impressed were the humanists, with parallel arguments invoking the supremacy of science, that they began to seek ways of introducing number into their several branches of learning. The aim was to count. So each discipline set out to discover or devise some units of homogeneous material which could be measured, and then the relations to other units could be expressed in the usual scientific way of linking constants and variables. Students of language would count phonemes; students of language would count images and thematic references; students of music or pictorial styles would count chords or lines; students of psychology stimuli and responses' students of sociology would count social traits and social events. They did. They do. And at this day, the superstition is rampant that, thanks to this numerology, there exists an imposing group of behavioral sciences. [laughter]

From the point of view of language, it is naturally interesting to ask how the units that were to be counted are arrived at. The procedure can be told in one word: abstraction. For it's clear that the human scene presents a medley of concrete facts, which appear to the observer and even more to the participant as new and unique. Each experience of fear or love, each marriage or divorce, each hearing of Hamlet or the Ninth Symphony is distinct and individual. Similarities can be found, to be sure, but they're balanced by infinite particularity. In order to count or measure, however, the particular must be ignored, and some element of identity discovered which shall determine the kind of event. Like the atom within the molecule or the electron within the atom. And since the would-be scientist of human affairs cannot chop up this material by instruments, he abstracts. That is, he assumes the presence of that central, identifying,

determining element, and he gives it a name. For example, among the rich variety of impulses that can lead to quarreling, he isolates something that he calls "hostile drive." He thinks he isolates this element, he thinks he is refining on crude observations. Actually, and this is the fallacy of willful abstraction, he covers the concrete diversity with a name that only vaguely points to the kind of entity that he means to measure. And that is how we come to give numerical values to leadership and cooperativeness without, in fact, knowing what they are. That is how we suppose that we've measured intelligence and aptitude; that is how we who live in New York have recently been persuaded that a certain combination of summer heat and humidity determines a "discomfort index"... [laughter] whether we feel discomforted or not. [laughter]

[00:48:03]

Indeed, in all these cases, the number acts on our imagination to produce a feeling of guilt, or of abnormality, in those who deviate from the tolerable range defined by the quotient, percentile, or index. In this procedure, which I have called willful abstraction, you will have detected the reason for the proliferating jargons that are choking the central, common tongue, inherited from an earlier age. In the name of science, everyone is licensed to manufacture a new set of terms, displacing the familiar names of things and feelings. Thereby weakening their vividness, and also lowering our zest for life. For, behind the loose terminology, lies a contempt for the truth of direct perception. And hence, a mistrust of the self. Intuitive knowledge is foolish, if scientific is available with a little ingenuity. The late E.L. Thorndike, the psychologist and promoter of intelligence tests, used to say, "Whatever exists, exists in quantity. And whatever exists in quantity can be measured." How plausible. Do you wish to understand another's personality? So much intelligence, so much scholastic aptitude, so much cooperation, so much love of children and dumb animals. [laughter] It is all as in the good old days of the phrenologists who charted the bumps on your skull.

One would have liked to see the scale on which Mr. Thorndike measured his love for his children. For according to him, if love was not measurable, it was nonexistent. But an abstraction is not put off by this type of difficulty. What cannot be measured directly, he argues, can be measured by its effects, as in a science. Horsepower is manifested in the work of raising 550 pounds one foot in one second. Love power could similarly be gauged by the number of spontaneous acts of kindness per thirty days spent domestically at sea level, excluding Christmas. [laughter]

In other words, if the object of study is intangible and elusive, measure the first visible thing next to it. If one cannot induce men to answer questions and perform revealing antics, one can

use rats. If one has doubts about the validity and the reliability of the results when applied to a single individual, one can take comfort in the statistical merit of the whole. For it could be strange if the, inexactitudes of our set of results did not match positively another set obtained in the same way. The one intellectual act forbidden in the enterprise is the act of analysis based on verbal integrity. I remember reading a study of genius which was based on lives taken at random from *Who's Who*. The likelihood that *Who's Who* did not harbor a single person deserving the name of genius never crossed the investigator's mind. To him, genius, talent, success in life, professional competence, high IQ, membership in a scholarly society, all that was one. An abstractionist sees only that some sort of gap exists between the retarded child and the occupant of a place in *Who's Who*, and that the gap exists in quantity. If a man is at the top of the scale, what's wrong with calling him and his work "genius"?

[00:52:35]

I have, I hope, shown the falsity of the logic which equates this type of misplaced abstraction with the fixed elements of a true science. But I want to make one small concession to the cult of abstraction—perhaps, in another sense. It seems to be no accident that it should flourish today in so many realms that are remote from science and pseudoscience. I have in mind the shapes and sounds of so-called abstract painting and music. The abstract puzzles of noncommunicative poetry and prose. And the seeming paradox of the study of man choosing depersonalized symbols for its expression. For instance, one finds articles devoted to the study of language which consist largely of differential equations. There's evidently a desire in our souls for flying away from the concrete particular. Why should this tendency beguile us all together at the same time?

The answer, perhaps, lies in another sense of number. I mean the greatly increased numbers of urban democracy, which inevitably impress the mind as bewildering, as indistinguishable, as producing only anonymity, which means featurelessness. Our sensibility is so struck by this phenomenon that it spurs the mind to corresponding modes of expression. We do not want a representation of the Duchess of Devonshire with her big hat, but a woman in the crowd. She must, therefore, have no face. We do not want General Sherman on horseback, but the unknown soldier, so he must be under a bare stone shaft. Art thus abstracts an imitation of the feeling of life, and also in self-defense, because we feel outnumbered, consequently small. But we're also equals, hence no single person or single event seems big enough or interesting enough to arrest our overtaxed attention. We know that what is individual exists as such by virtue of detail, but we have no time or taste for detail, except in objects, where it can be enumerated. In human beings, detail defies and offends us. We push it back and ignore it, in what seems to us the truer, because vaguer, generality.

[00:55:17]

And hence, we are perhaps made ready to accept the willful abstractions of pseudoscience. To the extent that this process gives relief to our nerves it may be justified, but what of the side effects? We've examined a number of them tonight: confusion, ambiguity, loss of self-awareness, and that common malaise which comes from the lack of social and spiritual communication. We say we're alienated, isolated, that we live and die alone, and groan over the fact. Indeed, we doubt our very being, and have to reassert it by calling ourselves "existentialists." What is this but the consequence of an overdose of number and abstraction, which poisons our acts and our emotions by denying or distorting intuitive truths? And how is intuitive truth to be expressed, save in words? The words that we belittle, mismanage, and destroy.

Pascal, who was a scientist, and knew what he was talking about, analyzed our predicament 300 years ago. When he said the geometrical mind, which deals with simple and rigid entities, tries to force them upon the subtle and variable fabric of life, that mind makes a fool of itself, and engenders great trouble. To say this is not, of course, to attack science or scientific method. Science is admirable. Scientific method is a stupendous feat of the human intelligence. But the culture of science in which we now live is as harshly neglectful of total reality as the culture of theology that science supplanted. And it is false for the same cause of misplaced abstraction. The act of criticism is, therefore, just as much in order now as then.

If you believe this, what may we conclude and what must we do? The conclusion is clear: Man dare not go on blunting his sense of concreteness and variability at the risk of becoming anonymous to himself, an abstraction he will someday fail to recognize in his own mirror. To sustain the sense of concreteness and variability, only one means has so far been found: the arts. For the arts embody that sense like a collective memory, and they extend it through perpetual discovery. But art alone is not enough. Art can distract from the tyranny of number and abstraction without guiding perception or strengthening judgment. When we want the concreteness that art embodies made articulate, and its discovery of variability made explicit, then the suitable medium is the intellectual art of words. The art of prose, which can record, point out, explain, and refine without limit.

Here comes into play on the side of life the difference between word and number. Number has a single meaning which is to be ordered only according to a few rigid rules known in advance. The words of prose, within their own far more complex rules, allow an infinitude of meanings, alterable in a hundred ways, both familiar and unpredictable. One has only to read the prose of

Milton, Swift, Ruskin, William James, or Shaw and compare it with the simulacrum of discourse which issues from the abstractionists of our age to feel the difference between the mind of man creating order among its own acutest perceptions, and that same mind stumbling among phantoms, as if under the influence of a drug. The idea of prose, the written word, is the only antidote we know for the careless, or criminal administration of number. [applause]

[01:00:19]

SPEAKER: There will be time for a few questions which Professor Barzun would be glad to answer.

[conversation among audience in background; laughter]

BARZUN: ...a little more light on the subject. Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you think that S.J. Perelman is a menace? [laughter]

BARZUN: No, not more than the rest of us, but do you count him among the word destroyers?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm a student, sir, you're our speaker. [laughter]

BARZUN: But I wonder what assumptions lay behind your question about whether your man is a menace? What is he supposed to have done that I've not heard about?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, he mentions math by saying "under the spreading [...]." Confusing the meaning of serious words.

BARZUN: No, he's probably not a menace as yet, but what strikes me as dangerous is that if instead of reading him, we imitate him, his jokes will fall flat, because we won't see that he's confusing it. [laughter] And that's what I had in mind.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Professor Barzun, you mentioned the word "basic" as being used incorrectly [...]. I'm glad it is because that's my last name. [laughter]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wonder what it was before. [laughter]

BARZUN: That's a fundamental question and... [laughter] ...I'm sure that no one takes your name in vain, but the common adjective with a small "b" is certainly used, I would say half the

time, as a mere reinforcement of something else, having nothing to do with a base, or with a fundamental, or elementary, which is what “basic,” a perfectly good word, originally meant. Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Now, Dr. Barzun, don't you associate the depreciation of language [loud microphone feedback] [...] ideas in general with the lack of appreciation for intellect? The playing down of intellectual ability and interest in education and language as a mark of an educated person. Don't you think that this disrespect for language is tied in with our growing democratic disrespect for intellect, for the “egghead,” as the term is well-known?

[01:03:19]

BARZUN: That's a very tangled situation that all of us try to diagnose and blame. Because, on the one hand, there is probably a kind of distrust of intellect, and preference for other forms of ability, but at the same time, there is a profound reverence for the experts, and the man of knowledge, and the one who has studied and made his own forms of the vast stores of information. Now, the contradiction there is due to the fact that [audio cuts out; part of the speech is repeated] ...other forms of ability, but at the same time, there is a profound reverence for the experts, and the man of knowledge, and the one who has studied and made his own forms of the vast stores of information. Now, the contradiction there is due to the fact that the public, as a whole, does not quite know who is who—whom to trust, and whom to disregard. I should hesitate to say that there is less regard for intelligence today than formerly. There may be less regard for intellect, and certainly for the kind of intellect that expresses itself through words, but they are but a part of the general movement that I described, which does not exclude us, we happy few in universities and evening audiences at writers' conferences. We are just as bad as the rest, and I'm inclined to take the view that we should begin by reforming ourselves before saying that our neighbors and our remoter compatriots are to blame for what we do wrong. And hence my attack first on the professional and habitual users of the literary language, from journalists to college professors. Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You mentioned, was it either Henry or William James? Anyway, I...

BARZUN: I mentioned them both; so what have you in mind?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, they reacted to this “journalese”...

BARZUN: No, I instanced Henry James and Kipling as two of the men who began to undermine the idea of prose in their works in the 80s and 90s. You want me to expand on that a little?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Gladly, yes.

BARZUN: Yes. Well, if you read the novels of the later Henry James, you see that their stuff, their texture—I'm not talking about their subjects—is made up of two parts, generally speaking. Jamesian prose is such a very elaborate prose, made up of words that are peculiarly his own: adverbs, very often like “absolutely” or “all too perfectly,” and things of that sort. A sort of fleshy prose, plus any number of current colloquialisms that he writes in quotation marks. And there are many more of those colloquialisms than you're aware of when you're simply reading from a story. In short, he was trying to show that this colloquial substance in which we all think, as it were, implies, or is connected with a much higher order of emotional or intellectual involvement, as represented by his characters. And in that way, he drew attention both to his own psychologizing and to the world outside which he wanted to have at least echoed in his novels, since a novel is supposed to be an echo of life.

Now, Kipling, with an entirely different purpose, achieves substantially the same end, because what does he do? He carefully listens to all the people who are unloading ships on the docks of southeast Asia, and catches their inflection, their turns of phrase. He listens to mechanics and technicians about their machinery and their property. And he stuffs all this raw material of life, this colloquialism and technicality, into his own prose, which is what I called, and referred to it in the talk, efficient, superior efficiency. Observe Kipling's verbs; they're never appropriate to the particular action described—he doesn't say that a steamer sailed down the harbor, it always waddles out of the harbor. And this perpetual misapplication is what gave our grandparents, or parents, a thrill. They saw, as they thought, the English language revived by this perpetual, very adroit and very artistic, misapplication of words. But what they couldn't foresee is that, when everybody starts doing that without the excuse of art, it becomes just bad English. It loses any effectiveness that it has and it descends either into poor journalese or into [...] of words. So, I'm not making these two responsible for what happened—don't mistake me on that point—but I'm merely suggesting that, if you're interested in this whole problem of prose, you can go back to these two very different fountainheads of different types of modern literature and see how a prose language is undone. To study like any other, but don't propose it without [...]. Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Now, as an educator, are you going to discontinue counting in term papers, [...] Ph.D? [white noise; sound of mic being adjusted]

BARZUN: I'm not an educator to begin with, but leaving that aside, discontinue counting in what sense? You mean giving grades, is that what you refer to?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [...] your very interesting talk, you are discouraging enumeration in favor of intelligent use of prose as [...] expression.

BARZUN: [...] I don't want to stop the men in the physics laboratory from using numbers, nor the census taker, nor anybody who can show that he is counting something that is countable. [laughter] But I certainly discourage people who count things that they say they've seen that nobody else has seen, and that they merely [...] through some word that is more imposing and impressive and that has merely the form of a legitimate unit or abstraction, and not its substance. It seems a simple thing to request. And I don't see why we have to do one at the expense of the other, either of them. Yes?

[01:11:56]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [off microphone, partially inaudible] Professor Barzun, [loud microphone feedback] it seems here that there's a parallel point that you have been applying here [...] and that is that [...] accounting this lack of respect for language, [...], believe that high school teachers should know to teach [...] grammar. I think that, partially, this is a common goal, but [...] beginning with D.H. Lawrence [...] and all that since the late 19th century [...] and French, and therefore also American writers, the preference for this rule, for the instinct, for the knowledge of the feeling rather than the knowledge of the intellect and of thought. The distrust of rational thought and the reliance, therefore, upon that of sensation, but some vague intuitive thought associated with it has become predominant and [...] a place for that kind of thinking and that kind of discovery, which I think is erroneously related to [...] poetics [...] and I think that this hardly accounts for our new generation of prose, both on the literary level and also on [...] level.

BARZUN: Well, certainly, the influence to which you point is a very large and powerful one. But I don't somehow see it in relation to the problem that I tried to discuss, because what Lawrence and some of his earlier contemporaries—that is, who were contemporaries with him, but were older men—tried to do was a little bit what I tried to do tonight: to puncture intellectual abstractions that had no direct intuitive, or if you like, visceral content. And that must always be done, and there must always be a kind of warfare in the world of ideas between those who say you are intellectualizing falsely and abstractly, and those who say, and you are reducing us to just a collection of unorganized sensations and feelings. As long as that debate is carried on in words of the quality and fitness that men like D.H. Lawrence can summon up, there's no harm done to the republic of letters. The difficulty comes with the imitators. And, perhaps this might combine both our points, the difficulty now is that we think we have the right to imitate

in our words, in our thoughts, in our behavior anybody who we admire. So that we are visceral with D.H. Lawrence, and we are numerical with Einstein, and we are everything with whatever strikes us as a pleasing image of ourselves in somebody else, whether or not we have the competence, the training, and the sense of responsibility to the subject matter. Isn't that the trouble, as in the S.J. Perelman example or Lewis Carroll—we all think that we can do what they did and we proceed to do it, but nobody really has the license to do that, and our own license is no good. [laughter] Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I ask this question in part because of your role as dean. Do you think the current policy line requiring college professors to be writers, and judging them, counting them as it were, perhaps by the quantity of words rather than the quality, and if this is not wise, what, realistically, can be done about it?

BARZUN: I entirely agree with you that this so-called policy has no merit whatsoever, and it is leading to all sorts of dire consequences that are only beginning to be appreciated. But you make a mistake if you think that because I'm a dean, that I have any authority in the matter. A dean is the last person who is listened to on such matters; it is, as you know, the department that requires publication, and it is the department that requires it, not for its own love of printed matter, but because it thinks some other department requires it, so they... [laughter] [...] with one another, by means of the meaningless and expensive items of research. That's another big topic that I can't begin at this late hour of the evening... [laughter]

[01:17:10]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Assuming that languages are capable of growth, what particular segment of society would you feel was best fitted to sponsor, to usher in any particular changes in usage of words or any new grammatical... I mean, you somewhat deplore the newspapers and some of the more popular organs like advertising, but what particular area of society do you think is best to usher in growth, if growth be desirable for a particular language?

BARZUN: What we may need, and I'm not being as frivolous as I may sound, what we may need is a foundation grant to subsidize certain families to bring up illiterates. [laughter] Because I think that the illiterates would give us a view of our language that we, who are lost in this morass, cannot possibly recover. As long as people did not know how to read and write, and they felt that words and spelling and the writing and the combining of them had a certain power which they yearned for, they had a respect for the things said and the things written. And the changes that they brought about in language were occasionally unfortunate, but very rarely—they usually improved through that sense of deep necessity, and their labor. Now that

it's easy, all we can do is [...]. So, my answer to you would be: the segment of the population that knows least of our pseudo-literary ways. Yes? Yes, this gentleman on the left.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: There are two words that are grating on me very much at this time; the local morning newspaper is constantly having one team "lobber" another, and there is a well-known magazine that had a blurb about "togetherness." What can we do to [...] such barbaric uses [...] [laughter]

BARZUN: Well, I don't think that the answer to that question is so difficult—we're all annoyed by one or more of these things. The thing is to put up a barrier to their repetition. See, most people feel as you do and as I do; they're annoyed, but the next thing they know they're using those words... [laughter] and that's because I think they think that's not very important to say or not to say a word, and also because they'll never develop that kind of self-consciousness that says, "I'm the kind of person who doesn't use this kind of word," though they feel that ethical restraint about all sorts of small acts. You do not steal the pens in the post office. Well, because you're the kind of person who has a code. All right, well, have a code about words. Don't use "togetherness" and don't "lobber" anybody or use the word about anybody else, and the thing is done. Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [off mic, unintelligible] [...] words personalized and psychologized are like your own [...]

BARZUN: Yes. [laughter] Yes. It would be in quotation marks, as in Henry James. [laughter] I think maybe that is the time to call...

SPEAKER: We've gone over our quota of time.

BARZUN: Thank you very much.

[applause; program ends at 01:21:18]