

HEINRICH BLUECHER

1899 - 1970

Irma Brandeis

I MOURN HEINRICH BLUECHER for myself and for every person who knew him at Bard College where, for some fifteen years, he turned all our heads at least momentarily in the direction of lofty and clear peaks in human achievement and made us long to hold them in our view and try to use them for the measurement of our own grounds.

Let me read for Heinrich Bluecher two writings of the Chinese philosopher-poet Lao-tse whom he prized.

The handbook of the strategist has said:
'Do not invite the fight, accept it instead,'
'Better a foot behind than an inch too far ahead.'
Which means:

Look a man straight in the face and make no move,
Roll up your sleeve and clench no fist,
Open your hand and show no weapon,
Bare your breast and find no foe.

But as long as there be a foe, value him,
Respect him, measure him, be humble toward him;
Let him not strip from you, however strong he be,
Compassion, the one wealth which can afford him.

(no. 69, tr. Witter Bynner)

Death might appear to be the issue of life,
Since for every three out of ten being born
Three out of ten are dying.

Then why
Should another three out of ten continue breeding
death?

Because of sheer madness to multiply.
But there is one out of ten, they say, so sure of life
That tiger and wild bull keep clear of his inland path.
Weapons turn from him on the battlefield,
No bull-horn could tell where to gore him,
No tiger-claw where to tear him,
No weapon where to enter him.
And why?

Because he has no death to die.

(no. 50, tr. Witter Bynner)

Every one of us who belonged to Bard College — faculty, students, staff — when Heinrich Bluecher taught there recalls the figure of that thoughtful man taking his daily walk on a stretch of the front campus: a little slow, a little huddled, headed nowhere in particular between Ludlow and library, always alone

to begin with, but never alone for long — our own peripatetic philosopher, the teacher of us all, whom we knew we could find if we looked for him, and whose walking thought we learned we could interrupt for talk, which he loved. When Heinrich left off teaching the loss to us was visible as well as internal and irreparable. None of us will forget him there, walking and conversing — the patient figure of a man who had survived fierce blows from the world but who would, as long as he might live, still look hopefully into its face for signs of its restored humanity, and who could still be fanned to flame by the ideas he had drawn from it. And all of us who worked with him were infected by some of these ideas and cherished them through him.

I cannot think of him without recalling a few of those ideas that seemed to me as much a part of him as his quizzing smile:

Humanization. What the Greek world gave to every subsequent age, with its civilizing of the fearful, rough, dark landscape of the unformed soul.

Scrutiny. Socrates said to him and he to us "an unexamined life is not worth living." His students learned what that meant by watching their teacher. His hands, his face, and his voice were also teachers. So it is possible that many of us applied to him these words he liked so well from Heraclitus: "The god whose shrine is at Delphi does not utter, nor does he conceal his meaning: he reveals it by a sign."

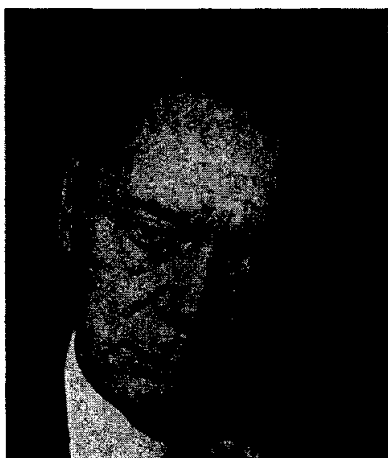
How he made us pore over these fragments of Heraclitus until we could draw meaning from them!

This ordered cosmos which is the same for all, was not created by any one of the gods or of mankind, but it was ever and is and shall be ever-living fire, kindled in measure and quenched in measure.

The idea of *logos* as a principle of order capable of transforming chaos — as in the world, so in the soul — was central to his love for civilization. And inseparably, the idea of *cosmos* as an ordered and meaningful whole, but a living and changing one: "kindled in measure and quenched in measure".

He was himself such a microcosmos, "kindled in measure" — and now quenched.

The Homeric Vision. He never tired of pointing out to us how Homer had transformed a rough-hewn



Jack Blum

world into a cosmos. A cosmos of which the Muses were the speaking voice. Nor how central to Homer's vision was his "free-standing man" supported by his own gathered strength. He pointed, further, to the "free-standing" column of the Greek temple structure, the free-standing statues, the free-standing Greek mind. I repeat the epithet because none seemed to come more often to Heinrich Bluecher's lips. He urged his students towards freedom of stance, motivated by the individual *logos*, strong yet always supple.

He had all the qualities of which I have spoken: the signature of meaning; the personal *logos*; the sense of cosmos; freedom of stance in every event and every company.

All the most profound and touching expressions of the Greek world he loved so well come easily and appropriately to be spoken for him. So today do the last words of Socrates to the Athenian public as Plato transmitted them:

Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty that no evil can happen to a good man either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that the time had arrived when it was better for me to die and be released from trouble; wherefore the oracle gave no sign. For which reason, also, I am not angry with my condemners or my accusers; they have done me no harm, although they did not mean to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them. The hour of departure has arrived and we go our ways — I to die and you to live. Which is better God, only, knows.

Irma Brandeis, Professor Emerita of English, and Jack A. Blum '62 were two of those who spoke at funeral services for Heinrich Bluecher in New York on November 4. Others were Horace Kallen, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy in the Graduate Faculty of the New School, Philip Miller '56, and former Bard faculty members Mary McCarthy and Ted Weiss. Miss Brandeis, Mr. Weiss, and Mr. Blum were also at the November 15 Memorial Service at the College, where President Kline and Dr. Shafer also spoke, and music was provided by Kate Wolff, Peg Gummere, and Renee Weiss '51. Heinrich Bluecher's ashes were interred in the Bard Cemetery following that ceremony.

I HAVE COME TODAY to say au revoir to a beloved friend, Heinrich Bluecher.

When we first met he was a teacher and I was his student. As his student I learned that great teachers have a way of turning students into friends. Great teachers gradually and gently — and occasionally not so gently — prod their students into awareness, then into dialogue and then into deep and thoughtful conversation filled with sharp probing questions. From the shared experience of intellectual development a deep and lasting friendship grows. And when friendship finds its roots in that shared experience it is too deep ever to be lost, — to be put aside, or to be forgotten.

What did Heinrich Bluecher teach us? He was called a professor of philosophy, yet he did not teach courses in individual philosophers or schools of philosophic thought. He taught philosophy by being a philosopher, by continuously questioning and testing the "wisdom" dished up by our society.

His questions quickly penetrated the logic which was the force of its authority, laying open the premises behind the logic. Once the premises were exposed, the most important questions came in quick sequence. "What does this assumption do to your possibilities as a creative human being?", he would ask.

"What does this proposition do to the prospects for human freedom?"

With some intricate philosophic systems or kitsch art or political proposition he would say, "You are the one who can decide to destroy your own freedom. You can limit yourself by choosing the wrong assumptions by not testing them properly. And the time to test them is before you are so committed to a course of action that you cannot retreat."

Heinrich Bluecher made this profound philosophic proposition the beginning point for his student.

For us asking questions, testing assumptions, checking ourselves before bartering away our freedom of action, became a methodology. It never ceases to amaze me that everyone does not operate the same way, and it never ceases to amaze me that many people who consider themselves intellectuals find these questions too difficult to tackle.

There has been no man with a greater love for human freedom than Heinrich Bluecher. This love was so intense that its heat has marked all of us. Who

could sit through his Common Course lecture on Jesus of Nazareth, listen to the discussion of Jesus seeking freedom for man — freedom from Rome — and freedom from materialism — and remain untouched. Many of us went to Common Course lectures for three straight years even though we had long since finished the course.

"Reason is the only tool we have, my friend," Heinrich Bluecher would say. But the way he said it always had a certain ambiguity and gradually I began to suspect that he used that line as a partial camouflage for compassion, sensitivity, and humanity. I suspect he frequently thought with his heart.

Class after class of freshmen at Bard were taught to respect their own experiences and their own emotions — a lesson which must be learned in this anti-human technological and organizational society. Once the respect had been taught Heinrich Bluecher showed how emotion and personal experience were the yard sticks by which assumptions were measured.

"Could you live with that painting on your wall?" "Was this piece of music an honest reflection of an artist's experience?", he asked us. And, finally, he would settle an argument by saying, "You know from your own experience that would not be right."

Heinrich Bluecher had time for all of us no matter how small our problem or how silly our idea. It was only when a student said to one of his questions, "So what?" that the door closed on him.

Why did this great philosopher, capable of making average students into adequate human beings, choose a small college without an endowment and with a small student body? He realized that great teaching is by dialogue and dialogue is impossible when there are great numbers. But he also said, "Bard is so small it must remain free. Even if the college wanted to sell out, it is so small that no one would want to buy it."

These values were more important to him than fame or reputation.

Of the many shared hours none were better than those we had during an experimental course

during Bard's winter field period. Twelve students went to classes with him four hours a day. The course was titled, "The Metaphysical Assumptions of 20th Century Man," and it was as universal as its title. We discussed art, music, literature, drama, philosophy, politics, religion, psychology, and personal relationships. Each day was a greater intellectual feast than the one before. Each day brought dozens of new insights and provoked discussions that lasted for hours after the class broke. Students in other courses watching our frenzied conversations, thought we were mad, and perhaps exposure to this dazzling intellectual adventure made us so. But if it did, we all remain a trifle mad, and we will always thirst for more.

When the course ended we had a party which was as exciting intellectually as the course, but more relaxed because we were all drinking. Toward the end of the evening, as we sat talking a student said to Heinrich Bluecher, "How do you wish to be addressed — as professor? — as doctor?" He looked at the student with mock anger and said, "My friend, my name is Heinrich Bluecher, and I wish to be known by my name. I insist that each of you recognize me as a person and address me by my name and nothing more."

And we did — all of us.

How many of us are so secure in identity, in sense of time and place that we need no title or institution or profession — only our name as identification?

When a friend with whom much has been shared dies it is impossible to accept the fact of his death. You expect that he will still be there down the road waiting to talk about this or that, much as he was when you last left him. And so you expect to see Heinrich Bluecher, down the road ready with one or a dozen of his impossible questions, ready to jump on your assumptions.

All of us who shared our growth with him will see him again and again down the road.

Au revoir Heinrich Bluecher.

Exodus: To Heinrich Bluecher

Enough. The aims of matrimony are not quite the same
As the aims of death.

I love you just the same. Quiet,

Let me tell you,

Let me tell you about good:

Good: a well without a bucket.

Good: an excursion without money.

Good: a photograph without a negative.

Good: a laugh without fingers.

Good: a sea without a sandheap.

Good: a carnation without a pencil.

I learned this when I became orange.

I learned this then.



Heinrich Bluecher, receiving Bard's Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from President Kline at a special ceremony in New York, July 1969. Also present were Anthony Hecht and Irma Brandeis.