

# Hazel E. Barnes 1915-2008

## *A Tribute and Farewell*

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BY BETTY CANNON, PH.D.

It is difficult to write this tribute and farewell to Hazel E. Barnes, my friend and mentor for over forty years, simply because I have long been unable to imagine the world without her. She died on March 18, 2008, at the age of ninety-two. I cannot help remembering that when Simone de Beauvoir met Hazel in 1985, Hazel had sent her an essay, "Beauvoir and Sartre: Forms of Farewell." Beauvoir wrote in advance of the meeting that this was the first time that a commentary on her book had truly "enriched" her. Hazel Barnes, through her deep attention to and understanding of Sartre's and Beauvoir's work through the years, was able to appreciate both the personal and the philosophical implications of Sartre's final years and death as described by Beauvoir in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre (La Cérémonie des adieux suivi de Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre, août-septembre 1974* in French). She was also able to suggest some interpretations that Beauvoir herself had perhaps not considered. After meeting Hazel, Beauvoir remarked to their mutual friend, Oreste Pucciani, that she had enjoyed the meeting and found Hazel "*très sympathique*." Though I do not claim a capacity similar to either Hazel or Beauvoir in writing this tribute and farewell, I was present with Hazel through those final years and I am very familiar with her work. I have also been deeply influenced by her, both personally and professionally.

In writing for *Sartre Studies International*, I realize that I am "preaching to the choir" regarding Hazel Barnes' merits as a translator and Sartre scholar. Most of the readers of this journal know and appreciate her professional work, and many have known her as a cherished colleague and friend. For those who did not have the privilege of knowing her, I would say that the thing to understand about Hazel Barnes is that she combined the unusual qualities of brilliant intellect and warm and generous humanity. These did not diminish with age. I will begin with a brief account of her intellectual accom-



plishments and end with some personal reminiscences, my own and those of others. I will include a brief account of her final decade, following the publication of her autobiography. After much deliberation, I have decided to discuss the circumstances surrounding her death as they relate to her philosophy and values.<sup>1</sup> Hazel's contributions to classics, philosophy and existential psychology were all remarkable. In her personal life, she was authentic, inspiring, warm and generous to students, friends and colleagues.

Hazel Barnes' intellectual achievements are a matter of public record. She was a widely read and published humanist who crossed disciplines with ease. She completed her doctorate in classics at Yale University in 1941, published on both classical and modern themes, and taught classics and humanities as well as philosophy for many years. She chaired both the classics and the humanities departments at the University of Colorado at Boulder. When she retired, she was awarded the title of Distinguished Professor Emerita, the first woman to hold this title. The most prestigious faculty award in "teaching, research and scholarship" at the University of Colorado was established in her name as the Hazel Barnes Prize in 1991. She was for many years a member of the national Phi Beta Kappa Senate and a visiting Phi Beta Kappa scholar at many universities. She was a distinguished visiting professor at various universities, returning to

Yale in this capacity in the spring of 1974. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship and was the recipient of numerous awards by various philosophy and humanities groups.

It is as America's foremost existential scholar that Hazel Barnes is best known to the world. She taught the first course in existentialism in this country at Toledo University in the spring of 1950. Her publications on existentialism began in 1953 with an essay on "Existentialism: Positive Contributions." This corrected her earlier off-hand response to a student in 1948 who had asked about existentialism. Hazel dismissed it as a "fashionable philosophy of defeatism and despair" from post-war Europe without really knowing enough about it. Misgivings over her answer led her to begin a study of Sartre's philosophy, which had not yet been translated into English. It became the major focus of her academic career. Her sense of its positive implications never left her. Her translation of selections from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* with an introduction to existential psychology was published in 1953 as *Existential Psychoanalysis*. This was followed by the full translation, with its impressive introduction, in 1956. It has not been surpassed. Her 1963 translation of Sartre's *Search for a Method*, which is the prelude to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, is superb. It includes an excellent introductory essay to his later work.

Hazel Barnes' own books on humanistic existentialism followed the translation of *Being and Nothingness*. They include *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism* (1959, republished as *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility* in 1962), *An Existentialist Ethics* (1967), *Sartre* (1973), and *Sartre and Flaubert* (1982). She published her autobiography, *The Story I tell Myself: A Venture in Existentialist Autobiography*, in 1997. Unlike Sartre's *The Words*, it not only gives an account of her early life, but follows her into the dilemmas of old age and approaching death.<sup>2</sup> *The Literature of Possibility* is a magnificent presentation to the English speaking world of the philosophical and literary writings of Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus and others. Probably the most philosophically original of Hazel Barnes' books is *An Existentialist Ethics*. She follows Sartre's reasons, based on his increasing political involvement and Marxist leanings, for refusing to write an ethics after *Being and Nothingness*. She respectfully disagrees with him about the current possibilities and need for an existentialist ethics and produces her own.<sup>3</sup> Her next book, *Sartre*, remains the clearest explication of his philosophy, early and late, that I know.

Among the most significant of Hazel Barnes' books on Sartre is her last one. *Sartre and Flaubert* is a critical study of Sartre's monu-

mental synthesis of his early and later philosophy in the Flaubert biography. *The Family Idiot*, as she says, represents the combination of Marxist sociology and existential psychoanalysis that Sartre had made the aim of his social science theory in *Search for a Method*. Turning down an offer to translate Sartre's nearly three thousand page, three-volume unfinished biography, Hazel instead produced her own magnificent book. She modestly claims that her study is only a beginning, since "it would take a lifetime to arrive at a full appreciation and worthy appraisal of this totalizing culmination of Sartre's life work" (p. 418). There is no question that her book will stand as the definitive study of Sartre's philosophical/psychological synthesis. Sartre himself sent her his notes for the fourth volume, which he was unable to complete because of blindness, with permission to quote as liberally as she liked from them. She basically constructed an account of what the fourth volume on *Madame Bovary* would have been, relying not only on Sartre's notes but on her own profound understanding of his philosophy.

Hazel Barnes was also a proponent of humanistic existentialism in other media. In 1952, she broadcast a series of radio programs for Ohio University Radio entitled "Philosophy and Yourself." As she herself says, it was for all practical purposes an introduction to existentialism. This was followed in 1962 by a series entitled "Self-Encounter: A Study in Existentialism" that was broadcast by National Educational Television stations across the United States. It created quite an interest and Hazel received many appreciative letters, inquiries and requests for further readings. Long thought to have been destroyed, this series has been recently recovered from the Library of Congress by Erik Sween and Jeffrey Ward Larsen. Jeff, who is writing his dissertation in intellectual history at the University of Colorado with this public television series at the center, began interviewing Hazel last spring about these tapes as she watched them with us at her home in Boulder and at the cabin she and her partner, Doris Schwalbe, owned in the mountains. She is as brilliant as ever, perhaps even more so, on the video and audiotapes from these sessions. Excerpts from the public television broadcast and Jeff's interviews were shown at the last Sartre Society meeting.

In addition to her books and public broadcasts, Hazel Barnes' articles, book chapters and reviews on humanistic existentialism, classics and biography are little gems. As a psychologist, I am particularly interested in the groundbreaking work she has done in existential psychology. A critical summary of some of this material from her later articles and book chapters appears in my article for the

*Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis* (2008) mentioned earlier. This material includes a discussion of her final essay, "Taking a Chance on Chance: A Sartrean View," which will appear later this year in the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*. Hazel is interested in both scientific theories of chance and evolutionary theory as they relate to Sartre. I could not help noting in rereading it that I felt some eerie connections with the last year of her life, which I shall presently discuss.

Basically, Hazel's conclusion is that without chance, in a determined universe, freedom would be impossible. *Chance* in French has the same double meaning that it has in English: It is both the unexpected and unpredictable incident that happens without reason and derails our plans, and it is an opportunity. Sometimes it appears as one of those "obligatory benefits" that she and Doris used to discuss - "unwelcome happenings we wished had not occurred but which later proved beneficial." On the negative side, Hazel notes, it is because of chance that Sartre rejects Heidegger's idea that we "live our death." The other, she quotes Sartre as saying, "lives my death and determines the meaning of 'my dead life'." We cannot plan our death. It is a matter of chance, and chance "removes from it any character as a harmonious end" (quote from *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 536-37).

This brings me to the personal side of this essay—Hazel Barnes' final decade, her death and her influence on students, friends and colleagues. Although her mind did not decline in extreme old age, her body was eventually not as resilient. Her bones were apparently brittle. After publishing her autobiography in 1997 at the age of eighty-one, she had some years unencumbered by physical difficulties. She continued to write, and she and Doris and their friends Hal and Haroula Evjen traveled the world extensively together. She and Doris even attended a philosophy conference in Iran at the invitation of the minister of culture in 1999. Hazel apparently delivered a brilliant lecture on Sartre and was interviewed by an Iranian women's magazine. She learned Spanish in her mid eighties, a goal she said, in her autobiography, she probably would not meet. She was easily reading Isabelle Allende and other novelists in Spanish before she was done.

Hazel suffered her first fall, in which she broke her femur, at the mountain cabin she shared with Doris two weeks after her ninetieth birthday celebration. The celebration was fortunately held early on November 11, 2005, rather than on her actual birthday of December 16, so that more of her friends could attend. Hazel had written a witty postscript to Euripides' play, *Alcestis*, for the occasion. Entitled

“Whatever Happened in Thessaly? A Postmodern Fantasy,” it was performed by her actor friend, Bill Mooney, and later published in *Amphora*. The face of the invitation is an artistic rendition of Sisyphus pushing the stone up the hill, entitled “Sisyphus, Still at It.”

Though distressed, Hazel fully recovered from the fall. This was followed by a broken wrist, after which she announced that she would not put up with a series of broken bones leading to physical helplessness and dependency. Nonetheless she continued to enjoy life. Doris died after a brief bout with cancer on July 8, 2007. Though Hazel missed her, she continued to enjoy a vigorous social calendar, including lunches, dinners, opera and other cultural events. Her habit of voraciously reading books on a variety of topics continued as well. She was following the American political primaries with gusto. She was well into the project of interviews with Jeff Larsen regarding her influence on American existentialism together with sorting her papers with him for the University of Colorado archives. She continued to read and review articles and book chapters that various people sent her.

Then on November 7, 2007, Hazel broke her hip. Her friends feared the worst. We knew her written and verbal declarations about the right to “self-deliverance” (an interesting term from the right to die movement that she uses in both her autobiography and the *Alcestis* narrative) under conditions where life seems too diminished or likely soon to become too diminished to be worth living. Hazel, we knew, was a member of the Hemlock Society. When she got out of the hospital, she refused the offers of friends to convalesce at their homes and hired a helper service. Most of her helpers became absolutely devoted to her. They reported many conversations that both interested and inspired them.

Friends visited frequently, and she continued reading, conversing and allowing herself to be interviewed for Jeff’s dissertation. She had progressed to using a walker when, on December 19, three days after a festive ninety-second birthday dinner at our house, she left a suicide note and took thirty sleeping pills. Apparently the note had been written just prior to her birthday and made it apparent why she had a policy of absolutely no presents - though she accepted cards. The note explained that while she was not unhappy and realized that she had much for which to be grateful, she felt that the time had come to take action while she could still do so. It is obvious from the pictures fortunately taken at the party that Hazel was happy. Why then would she do this? After all, in *An Existentialist Ethics*, she had declared that suicide, although it should not be made illegal, is not

an ethical choice except under extreme conditions where it is the lesser of two evils.

I think the answer lies in the chapter on old age in her autobiography. I imagine that Hazel herself would approve of this discussion, as it demonstrates putting into practice her avowed intentions and values. It brings up an important issue, one that she herself approaches head-on in her autobiography and elsewhere. Once one's life has reached the point where the future holds little possibility, because of physical or psychological disability, for living in a way one considers meaningful and satisfying, she has come to believe that suicide may be the lesser of two evils.

When Hazel woke up from a thirty-six hour undisturbed sleep and several days of disorientation in which friends watched over her, she asked, "Why am I still here?" After we assured her we had not intervened and told her what had happened, she had me type up—and she herself gave to family and friends—the explanation in her suicide note. There she says in part that "...upon a realistic appraisal of my present condition, and after assessing the possibilities and the overwhelming probabilities of what is to come, I cannot imagine a future that is not too diminished and bleak for me to be willing to accept it." She says that she wishes to "act before I am no longer able to choose freely and with full control."

What she does not say, but discusses in the autobiography, is that this would be unnecessary if our legal system did not make assisted suicide under previously designated conditions illegal. It is probably time to consider the possibility that suicide can be, as Hazel says in her autobiography, a free choice that is sometimes, like abortion, not a happy decision but preferable to its alternatives. Hazel would not, of course, prescribe this choice for everyone faced with a debilitating condition. Doris, for example, always said that she would prefer to live out whatever happened. She did. But Hazel never wanted to live in a state of helplessness or incapacity. I agree with her that she and others deserve to have legal sanction for this choice.

The irony is that what Hazel might have wished, had she had the liberty to choose assisted suicide, is essentially what happened. She lived for three months after her attempt, visiting with friends, going out to lunch and dinner, having afternoon cocktails, attending social and cultural events, and watching movies and reading, all in full possession of her faculties. I think she appreciated and enjoyed these events, though she did not like the specter of helplessness that haunted her. Jeff continued his interviews and wrote a fifty-page thesis proposal that had her enthusiastic approval.

All of us cherished the extra time with her. She cut back on the time her helpers spent with her up until the last few days. She was active and interested in life. She assured us she would not put us through another suicide attempt, though she did stop taking her heart medication. Although she fell twice during her last week, she fortunately did not break another bone or let her increasing weakness due to a heart that was failing stop her from going out or visiting with friends at home. Yet she clear-sightedly saw what was happening, saying to me one day close to her death, "It's perfectly obvious that I'm dying."

On the Sunday before she died on a Tuesday evening, she spent an evening with friends, partially dozing but waking to interject remarks that let us know she was present. She even had us collapsed with laughter at times. For example, when someone said, "Maybe it's time to open another bottle of wine," she interjected, "Maybe it's time for me to wake up." Then on Monday morning she entered a kind of twilight sleep punctuated by moments of remarkable clarity. She died sleeping peacefully in her own bed just after friends had left for the evening on March 18, 2008. Her favorite helper called us just as we got home at 10:45 to say, "She didn't wake up at all. She just slowly stopped breathing." We returned to take care of things and to say our farewells.

Other friends arrived in the morning and many visited during the day. We spent the time reminiscing about Hazel, laughing and crying, and feeling her loss as we waited for the funeral home to take her body away for cremation at 4:00 in the afternoon. Later we were amused to learn that we had perhaps held an atheistic existentialist version of what the Irish Catholics would call a "wake." Her memorial at the University of Colorado on April 12 was followed the next day by about twenty of her closest friends and her brother and niece going to the mountains to scatter her ashes by the cabin in the same location where she and friends had earlier scattered Doris's ashes. This was her request. I'm sure she would have enjoyed the potluck where we reminisced about her afterward.

Probably Hazel would have chosen this ending had she been assured that others could have assisted her with suicide if she lapsed into a vegetative state or became mentally or physically debilitated. It was only chance that she did not. I am not, however, saying that Hazel was or might have been a victim in coming up against the limitations of the current legal system. Just as the existentialist idea that freedom is inherent even in the most limiting conditions does not justify social injustice, so social injustice does not annihilate freedom.

As Hazel says in *Humanistic Existentialism*, "...we have seen that freedom can exist only where there is a choice, and choice demands a limiting facticity. Man's factual condition, his mortal body, his position in time and place—these do not prevent freedom; they are the stuff of which it makes itself" (p. 365).

Perhaps the additional time her friends had with Hazel after her suicide attempt falls within the purview of those "obligatory benefits" that she and Doris liked to discuss. Certainly the conversations we had, the time to express love and gratitude, the pleasures we shared together were "goods." Hazel herself often said following a lunch or dinner or movie watched at home during this time, "We had fun, didn't we?" Yes, we did. This does not, of course, excuse inhumane laws that forbid people from making personal choices about how to end their lives. It does show the part that "chance" plays in it all. What is important, as Hazel says in her final forthcoming essay, is the possibilities we may snatch from the chance occurrences of our lives. We are always responsible for what we make of the givens of our existence. I am grateful for what we made of those last three months.

Hazel Barnes' legacy includes her inspiring influence on many students and colleagues, including several generations of Sartre scholars. Jeff Larsen is the last of a long line of students and colleagues who have gratefully worked with Hazel Barnes on existential topics. On the human side of things, besides being a generous, kind, and engaging friend, Hazel continually challenged her students and colleagues to go beyond any limiting ideas we may have had of ourselves and our life possibilities. She believed in us when we had our own doubts. Her colleague Jim Palmer, at her memorial at the University of Colorado, told the story about how he was almost dismissed from his job in the humanities department because of an unfinished dissertation. Hazel promised the university he would finish it by spring. Despite having only a poorly taped together first draft of the manuscript, he managed to complete it because he "couldn't make a liar of the one person who was the soul of integrity." Many of us have felt similarly inspired by her confidence in us and mortified at the thought of disappointing her.

I first heard Hazel Barnes lecture when I came to the University of Colorado as a graduate student in 1966. I startled the friend who attended the lecture with me by saying, "I want to *be* Hazel Barnes." I was 23. Of course, I did not achieve that illustrious ambition - no one could come even close. But I think it speaks to the inspiration she provided for so many of us. Hazel was always demanding of quality work in her students and the scholars whose work she

reviewed. She would not accede to anything she did not consider up to par, but she was open to possibilities. I remember my own trepidation in asking her to be on my dissertation committee in literature at the University of Colorado. I had a plan for using some of Sartre's ideas to discuss the plays of George Bernard Shaw. Hazel looked puzzled and said, "Well, I guess you could compare anything to anything." Regaining my composure with some difficulty, I said, "Well, if I do it, will you read it?" She said she would and she did, and somehow she found it acceptable. Over time we became close friends. She later confessed her concern at the time that what I was about to write would be utter nonsense.

After switching fields, I dedicated my book on *Sartre and Psychoanalysis* (1991) to her. It probably would not have been written, and it certainly would have been less precise, without her exacting influence. She read it from start to finish, made many helpful suggestions and even spot checked the French translation with me. When, as the book neared completion, I decided that I absolutely must write three more chapters, she and Doris practically wrenched it from my hands and insisted that I send it to the publisher. I would probably still be working on it if they had not done this.

Many other Sartre scholars attest to the encouraging letters and the enlightening conversations they have had with Hazel Barnes about their work. Thomas R. Flynn, who is himself a fine Sartre scholar, told the North American Sartre Society at the April meeting this year about his first encounter with Hazel. Tom met Hazel when he was a young lecturer at Carroll College in Montana interested in existentialism. He came to Denver to hear her deliver a major address at a professional conference in 1963. The talk, he says, "was informed, insightful and delivered with the grace that I learned to expect of her oral presentations." Most memorable, however, was her kind welcome "...to a young teacher posing so many questions as if I were the only one in attendance that day." He soon learned that this was how she treated everyone: "She had just earned a fan for life." Tom later became close friends with Hazel and Doris, visiting them in Boulder and at professional conferences as well as traveling around France with them visiting "Flaubert country." It was during this time that Hazel had the memorable visit with Simone de Beauvoir described in her autobiography.

Hazel Barnes was a brilliant lecturer as well as a teacher who engaged deeply with her students. Our mutual friend and her former student Marcus Edward tells the story of how she arrived at one class years ago to discover that she had forgotten her notes. She then pro-

ceeded to give a flawless lecture without them, only to discover at the end that she had had them with her all along. At her memorial, one speaker noted that contemporary students who object to lecture classes simply have not heard the caliber of lectures consistently delivered by Hazel Barnes. Jeff Larsen was surprised to discover that her talks for the “Self-Encounter” series were made entirely without teleprompts or notes. Her flawless engagement with her audience and the material is totally obvious.

Hazel herself, despite her great knowledge and eloquence, was certainly never pompous or overconfident. She was even humble and sometimes concerned about the value of her own work. She was even more demanding of herself than of her students. I remember traveling with her to the first meeting of the North American Sartre Society at the New School in New York where she gave the inaugural address in 1985. It took me a while, as we were having cocktails on the plane, to realize that she was serious when she wondered whether what she had to say would be of value to Sartre scholars. Of course, the lecture was brilliant and enthusiastically received.

Three hours before she died, in that kind of twilight reverie that people sometimes fall into as they near death, Hazel said to my husband, Reed Lindberg, who had become her good friend, “My words were good.” Then she apparently questioned this, “Were my words good?” Reed reassured her that they were indeed more than good, they were excellent. She smiled and seemed satisfied. I believe her words, her ideas and her influence were indeed good.

The thought has occurred to me that I should be able to continue my on-going conversations with Hazel in my head since they have gone on for over forty years. Alas, I realize this will not be possible. Hazel was always so present, so brilliant, so delightfully original and so able to “swing free” (to use a metaphor she introduces at the end of her autobiography) in her views that she is impossible to replicate. She had courage and passion for life, a talent for friendship and a genius for making difficult ideas accessible in writing and in conversation. She will be deeply missed.

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on existentialist therapy, *Sartre and Psychoanalysis*. She is a member of the editorial boards of three professional journals, including this one, and a past executive committee member and chair of the North American Sartre Society. She is Hazel Barnes' literary executor. She plans to co-edit with Jeff Larsen a collection of Hazel's essays on existentialism. She and Jeff are also putting together a special issue on Hazel Barnes for the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*. They would appreciate receiving remembrances of Hazel from people who knew her. Betty can be reached at [betty.cannon@boulderpsych.com](mailto:betty.cannon@boulderpsych.com) or found on the web at [www.boulderpsych.com](http://www.boulderpsych.com).

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#### *Television Series*

Barnes, Hazel E. “Self-Encounter: A Study in Existentialism.” A series of ten half-hour shows on Existentialism. These were telecast on National Educational Television stations throughout the United States in 1962. Long thought to have been lost, they have been recovered and restored by the Library of Congress at the request of Erik Sween, Jeffrey Ward Larsen and Hazel E. Barnes. Copies are now in the archives of the University of Colorado at Boulder Library.

## Notes

1. A more complete account, together with further discussion of Hazel’s contributions to existential psychology, appears in the *Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis* 19.2, July 2008, pp. 389-414. I am grateful for the journal’s permission repeat material from that article in this one.
2. For an account of Hazel Barnes’ autobiography as a venture in existential self-analysis, see my article, “Hazel E. Barnes’ Autobiography as an Existential Analytic Example of the Good Life: A Student’s Tribute to Her Mentor” (*Journal of the Society For Existential Analysis*, January 2000, pp. 21-53).

3. Sartre's manuscript on ethics was published posthumously in French as *Cahiers pour une morale* (*Notebooks for an Ethics* in the English translation) in 1983. Sartre did not complete the book, which contains much rich speculation on the subject. As might be expected, his premises do not differ essentially from Hazel's attempt to base an existentialist ethics on respect for and valuing of one's own and the other's freedom in situation together with the assumption of responsibility. Hazel's examples and concerns are often different and sometimes clearer than Sartre's, and she introduces an important discussion about why we should choose to be ethical at all. She includes a consideration of the contributions of Camus and Beauvoir as well as Sartre. Hazel chose the title with care, indicating that she was not trying to write the definitive existentialist ethics or the book that Sartre had failed to write, but only to produce her own version based on his philosophy.