

☆ EDITORIAL ☆

Cassius Jackson Keyser, 1862-1947

AT THE AGE OF 85, in full vigor of his profound and sparkling mind, Cassius Jackson Keyser, emeritus Adrain professor of mathematics, Columbia University, died on May 8, 1947, in New York City.

Here and now we cannot give more than a perfunctory survey of this admirably full and rich life. As teacher, thinker, and writer, he made original and systematic efforts on behalf of the *relationship of mathematics and philosophy*, and of both to education; and—even more important—on behalf of the possible contribution of these disciplines toward the preservation and *re-juvenation* of man's civilization. The danger, nay, the menace of decay and dilapidation of civilization in ever more complex and mechanized networks of human relations, was clear to Keyser's searching and universalistic mind long before the second and even before the first of the world catastrophes had occurred. He not only wrote about it but he tried his best to combat these dangers in *his* sphere and with the means at his command—education. The significance of Keyser's work may become even more evident to future generations than it has, so far, to his contemporaries—if a civilization worthy of the name is to survive.

Born in Rawson, Ohio, on May 15, 1862, he early showed his brilliance; with a B.S. at the age of 21, he became

principal and superintendent of public schools in Ohio and Missouri from 1885-90. After 1891 he taught mathematics, in a steady ascendancy from instructor to professor, at the University of Missouri, Harvard, State Normal School (New Paltz, N. Y.), Washington University (St. Louis), and Barnard College. Then, from 1904 until 1927, he was Adrain professor at Columbia University, serving during this period also as exchange professor at the University of California. He was also a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

However, far beyond his immediate influence exerted through his teaching and his efforts to improve educational methods in mathematics in his beloved America, beyond even his significance as a mathematical thinker and explorer of new frontiers, Keyser will become a far-radiating force through what appears to be his most original contribution: the *new position* in which he strove to put mathematics in its philosophic aspects, in its implications for and its import on, mankind's evolution, especially man's future.

It is in this area—most notably in his outstanding work *Mathematical Philosophy* (1922)—that Keyser crossed the path of the ideas which have since achieved systematic formulation and accelerating expansion as general semantics.

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At that early time, it was Keyser who, in his above-named book, gave full recognition and praise to Korzybski's newly established principles, especially the human phenomenon of 'time-binding.'

True enough, it is quite difficult to evaluate to what degree the average student of mathematics, and, for that matter, also of general semantics, may have acquainted himself with Keyser's writings. But whoever will undertake to study them will not only be richly rewarded but will, probably, be agreeably surprised by the ease, clarity and graciousness of his style in treating subjects which are usually thought of as dull and unattractive.

Another trait in which the general semanticist will find genuine kinship with Keyser, is the latter's deep feeling of the *responsibility* of a reputedly so 'remote' and abstract a science as mathematics, and of science in general, to mankind's practical social future. Thus, Keyser wrote as early as 1935—long before the now so conspicuous 'awakening of the scientists to civic consciousness'—in the series included in *Mathematics and the Question of the Cosmic Mind* about 'the tragedy of our modern culture.'

Not only as a scientist, but also as a

private citizen, Keyser as late as his eightieth year would take a forthright stand in all matters he deemed worthy of public attention. In personal-social relationships he was of unusual charm and wit, of great width of interests, and of an erudition far beyond his 'own' scientific field. When I visited him last time, he read to me with vibrant voice, with almost fiery feeling and in perfect musical rhythm the translation of Euripides' famous choric praise of Athens, he himself enjoying it with a youthful enthusiasm.

Cassius Jackson Keyser, American mathematician, native son of the Middle West, whose mind was to become universal in scope, will be remembered far beyond the circle of his many students and friends. The twilight of an oncoming period of dark ages seems ready to engulf our civilization, menacing freedom of thought and of teaching in many lands. All the more posterity will have to seek for the steady and friendly light that shines forth into the darkness from the life work of the author of *Mathematical Philosophy*, who was in his own quiet way an American fighter for the survival of humanity.

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It happens to be the case that we cannot, in our language, refer to the sensible properties of a thing without introducing a word or phrase which appears to stand for the thing itself as opposed to anything which may be said about it. And, as a result of this, those who are infected by the primitive superstition that to every name a single real entity must correspond assume that it is necessary to distinguish logically between the thing itself and any, or all, of its sensible properties. And so they employ the term 'substance' to refer to the thing itself.

A. J. AYER, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Oxford U.P., 1936).