

Editorial: Decadence

'When the nation's history is poorly taught in schools, ignored by the young, and proudly rejected by qualified elders, awareness of tradition consists only in wanting to destroy it.' Thus Jacques Barzun, at the age of 93, describing what he sees as decadence.

Decadence on this view is not itself descent into sensation, sensuality and the cult of celebrity. This descent is effect rather than cause, the result of the boredom and lack of perspective endemic to those who live in a time of affluence, but cut off from a sense of history or purpose.

Other symptoms of decadence described by Barzun are creaking institutions, forms of art seemingly exhausted, a narrowly educated technocratic elite running things at the top, and a proletariat sated on low entertainment.

What Barzun describes are all important aspects of modern society. Academic philosophy has little to say on these matters, and what it does say is pretty thin. No doubt Barzun would see this failure, if such it is, as another sign of decadence.

But one wonders if that is all there is to it. Barzun's book *From Dawn to Decadence* was a best-seller in America for months, and has attracted an immense amount of attention. The same was true of similar arguments put not so long ago by Allan Bloom, Saul Bellow and Harold Bloom. All these authors, like Barzun, bespatter their books with references to the traditions and works we are supposed not to teach or value any more, and which we are supposed to have forgotten. One sees here the germs of a paradox: a purportedly decadent age feasting on the past it sees as richer and more robust than our own time; but the very same past forgetfulness of which is what makes us decadent.