

# Facilis Discensus Averno

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

From Dawn to Decadence:  
500 Years of Western Cultural Life,  
From 1500 to the Present  
by Jacques Barzun  
New York: HarperCollins;  
877 pp., \$36.00



Jacques Barzun's 30-somethingth book, though published by HarperCollins, bears the unmistakable stamp of Columbia University, from whose college the author graduated, where he was appointed Seth Low Professor of History, and served for ten years as dean of faculties and provost. I refer, of course, to the college's once renowned, now *démodé*, Western Civilization program: a four-semester course of lectures and readings, mostly from a hefty two-volume work published by Columbia University Press, required of all candidates for the Bachelor of Arts degree. As a graduate of Columbia College, I consider myself the beneficiary, as well as the survivor, of a curriculum that gave the student the illusion (at least) of having Read All the Books, while making up in some part for the generally disappointing level of undergraduate instruction that prevailed in the college. (In fact, the reading lists for *all* courses at Columbia were comprehensively superb—a boon for a student temperamentally impatient, then as now, at being lectured at; who admires the sound of the human voice in the opera house rather than in the lecture hall and is incapable of concentrating on intellectual communication whose medium is something other than the PRINTED word.) Next after Western Civ, perhaps, Columbia is famous for its School of Journalism, the first institution of its kind. While I came to the journalistic profession (the phrase is obviously an oxymoron) by another route, I have not been immune subsequently to its primary occupational hazard: the philistinism that

substitutes the Somali peacekeeping operation for the Peloponnesian War; the Republic of Haiti for the Republic of Venice; Martin Luther King, Jr., for Martin Luther; William Safire for Dr. Johnson; Bill Clinton for Muhammad, Don Juan, and the Marquis de Sade. Professor Barzun's book, with its essentially pedagogical approach to its subject, its textbook layout and highlighted quotations, took me back a few years to a formative and somewhat more humble period in my intellectual career, and yet I cannot say I resented the experience; rather, I welcomed and enjoyed it. If every working journalist read *From Dawn to Decadence* this year, the result might (just perhaps) amount to a small Enlightenment, however ephemeral, on the American Grub Street. The young (practitioners in their 20's and 30's) could finally learn something about the dead elephant they've been so courageously kicking since leaving school, while their elders, aged in the 40's, 50's, and 60's—the last generation of Americans who can fairly be said to have had an education—would experience a refresher course, the more enjoyable for not requiring an examination at the end of it. Reading Barzun's book, I felt myself a living example of the truth of Dr. Johnson's dictum that men more often need to be reminded than instructed.

In Jacques Barzun's conception, the past five centuries of Western civilization that constitute the modern era are divided into four great revolutionary movements—the religious, the monarchical,

the liberal-philosophical, and the social—whose impress affects the present powerfully and all of which conduce to a single end, which is decadence. Barzun is quick to remind the reader that the word indicates a falling off, not stoppage or total ruin:

It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary it is a very active time, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility. The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. . . . [T]he upshot is a floating hostility to things as they are.

Almost in the same breath, however, he speaks of demise, which he argues to be the result of the West's pressing its most characteristic purposes to their utmost conclusions. ("This ending is shown by the deadlocks of our time: for and against nationalism, for and against individualism, for and against the high arts, for and against strict morals and religious belief.") These purposes, which Barzun perceives as the overriding cultural themes suggested by "continuity in aims" over half a millennium, are accorded similar status in his book, where they appear always in capital letters:

## RECEIVED WISDOM

2006: *The Chautauqua Rising* by Jack Cashill (Dunkirk, NY: Olin Frederick, Inc.; 273 pages, \$22.95)

I picked up Jack Cashill's political suspense novel, *2006: The Chautauqua Rising*, because it is set in the grapy southwest of New York State. I didn't put it down until I had finished it, long after midnight.

Cashill's rebels rise from the western fringe of Upstate New York's Burned-Over District, where a century and a half ago ragged prophets and holy fools tramped the land preaching every sort of revolution. His "constitutionalist underground" dream team of Seneca Indians, Amish, hill people, Latin Mass Catholics, a sportswriter, and a beautiful folksinger match wits and muscle with the homicidal careerists who would seize their guns and shut down their homeschools. If this sounds drearily didactic, it isn't. The novel is fast-paced and genuinely suspenseful, and its conclusion is an utterly implausible hoot.

Tinted by local color, animated by righteous (and condign) outrage, *2006: The Chautauqua Rising* is a page-turner with its heart in the right place.

—Bill Kauffman

EMANCIPATION, PRIMITIVISM, INDIVIDUALISM, SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, ABSTRACTION, ANALYSIS, SPECIALISM, SCIENTISM, SECULARISM, REDUCTIONISM.

Having been a wallflower all my life at dances and of the male persuasion into the bargain, I can only imagine that the experience of reading this book might be comparable to dancing with a partner who fails to exert what used to be called a sufficiently strong lead. While Barzun leans heavily on the reader in making a compelling case for sectarian factionalism, post-Reformation, as the proximate cause of the rise of the nation-state ruled by a monarch in the interest of imposing social and political stability (in retrospect, the locus of power since the late Middle Ages appears to have passed from the Holy Roman Empire to the warring 16th-century sects, thence to modern nations, and finally to a free-floating internationalist elite), for the most part he relies on catalog, anecdote, textbook generalities, and encapsulated biography to develop a thesis that lacks assertiveness, strong development, and bold delineation, for which upper-case nudges are substituted to indicate the pertinent theme (EMANCIPATION, ABSTRACTION). The principle of selection is careful enough, the material sufficiently well chosen, that much—indeed most—of Barzun's story is interesting, at times even entertaining, though not exactly original. Moreover, Barzun, as he enters the century of his own personal experience (he was born in France in 1907), exerts a stronger (and markedly more astringent) point of view. Outlines are sketched more starkly, col-

ors are laid on more vividly: "The blow that hurled the modern world on its course of self-destruction was the Great War of 1914-18." (That is true, though—again—in no way a remarkable insight. By comparison, here is Professor Barzun's most insightful comment on the circumstances giving rise to that war: "It was late in the day to hope for the fusion [in the Balkans] that the full-fledged nations had achieved when the occidental monarchs made their revolution.")

In the public mind, Jacques Barzun remains the embodiment of the old ideal of the gentleman-and-scholar, America's foremost—almost its last—patrician intellectual; fairly or unfairly, he gained a reputation in the wake of the Columbia riots of 1969 as a reactionary defender of the Old Idea of the university, and of Western culture itself. For that reason it is hardly surprising to find him reacting with feeling against "artists" whose avowed aim is "[h]elping to destroy a culture," and to their message that "art as an institution with a moral purpose [is] dead." What is surprising is to stumble on such contradictions—frequent enough throughout the text to come finally as no surprise—of Professor Barzun's reputation as his extremely uncritical assessment of Tolstoy (a selfish monster in his personal life and by no means always a conscientious artist) and, even more, of George Bernard Shaw—who praised Stalin for his strength of mind and purpose in slaughtering tens of millions of his own people. (Since Shaw ridiculed Hitler and Mussolini, Barzun argues that his support for the Soviet dictator must be seen as an uncharacteristic

act inconsistent with his true nature and opinions.)

Jacques Barzun, who in *From Dawn to Decadence* chose to work by way of what the French call *amoncellement* and juxtaposition, ought not to be faulted for failing to write a tendentious, ham-handed, pseudoscholarly book in the genre that is so popular today. On the other hand, a remark on almost the last page of the book that he *did* write caught my attention:

The careful historian, before he ventures to predict the course of history, murmurs to himself, "*Schedel*." It is not a magic word, but the name of a learned German who, in 1493—note the date—compiled and published the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. It announced that the sixth of the seven ages of mankind was drawing to a close, and it included several blank pages for recording anything of interest that might still occur during the following days. As we know, what occurred was the opening of the New World and all the innovations that followed from it—hardly a close.

This passage, rather than point me ahead to the futuristic vision with which Barzun concludes, instead sent me back to the beginning—not only of his book but of the modern era, the year 1500. Elsewhere Barzun refers to "the cultural lag of about ten years that had generally obtained between European and American art and intellect," and that the American expatriates of the 1920's are said to have succeeded in closing. It was this notion of Europe informing and forming the New World—especially the part of it known as the United States—that stirred an idea I have found myself toying with for some years. It is that the New World—created significantly by Old World adventurers, dissenters and heretics, the restless, the dispossessed, and the disaffected—in the process of creating itself succeeded in recreating (perhaps deconstructing is the better word) the Old one. There seems no doubt this did occur, at least in some degree: The question is simply how early the process began—the early 1500's or the 1950's, or somewhere in between. My guess is that—in non- or extra-intellectual ways to begin with; simply by force of new examples and the self-con-

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scious program (again, particularly in what became the United States) to begin the human experiment over again, to create not just a new world but a new man, a new universe, and a new metaphysic to go with them—the Americas, almost from the time of first settlement, influenced the old Western world more than it influenced them, no matter that Descartes lived in France and John Locke in England. (Here I am thinking not, for instance, of the concept of the Noble Savage, which after all was a production of the European mind, not that of American colonials besieged by savages, but something far more profound, or anyway ineffable.) The agenda of the New World, concerned as these were with discovering wealth or freedom of every sort almost beyond the European imagination, have all been part of an attempt to escape the condition of being human—an urge never characteristic of the older culture of the West, which aimed firstly at salvation, secondly at a worldly catholicity of experience, intellectual and otherwise, that made it what Barzun terms a mongrel civilization *par excellence*. Perhaps the clearest, or at least the most dramatic, way to conceive of the relation is in dialectical terms: the Old World Thesis confronted by its offspring, the New World Antithesis, whose reconciliation is the Synthesis—identified here as Decadence.

This is the unwritten history that Barzun's most enjoyable consideration of the modern era brought up to me. It is al-

so the history of the half-millennium 1500-2000 that I would write, if only I had one-tenth the learning, the courage, and the stamina that Jacques Barzun, *aetat*. 93, still enjoys.

*Chilton Williamson, Jr., is the senior editor for books at Chronicles.*

## Obscurely Called: Richard Wilbur at Eighty by Alan Sullivan

Mayflies:  
New Poems and Translations  
by Richard Wilbur  
New York: Harcourt Brace;  
80 pp., \$22.00

Now nearly 80 years of age, Richard Wilbur has recently published *Mayflies*, a new book of poems and translations. This slim volume has attracted slight—and sometimes slighting—notice in most literary publications. America's poetry establishment does not quite know what to make of its former poet laureate. For half a century, this eminent translator of 17th- and 18th-century

French plays has persisted in writing measured yet passionate religious verse in the manner of Donne or Herbert. From his first book of poems, *The Beautiful Changes*, published in 1947, Wilbur has chronicled the permutations of an often-challenged yet resilient faith. Consider this early sonnet, "Praise in Summer":

Obscurely yet most surely called to  
praise,  
As summer sometimes calls us all, I  
said  
The hills are heavens full of  
branching ways  
Where star-nosed moles fly over-  
head the dead;  
I said the trees are mines in air, I  
said  
See how the sparrow burrows in  
the sky!  
And then I wondered why this mad  
*instead*  
Perverts our praise to uncreation,  
why  
Such savors in this wrenching  
things awry.  
Does sense so stale that it must  
needs derange  
The world to know it? 'To a praise-  
ful eye  
Should it not be enough of fresh  
and strange  
That trees grow green, and moles  
can course in clay,  
And sparrows sweep the ceilings of  
our day?

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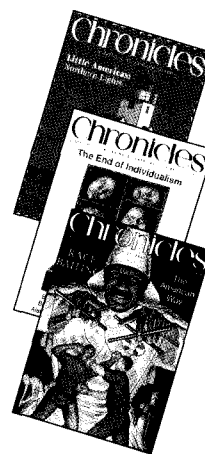
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