

Decadence and Its Critics

Through the ages the death of civilizations, no less than the death of human beings, has fascinated unnumbered observers of the human condition. For those who seek examples of civilization's perdurability, the historical record is not reassuring. After all, what is Sumeria today but eroding ziggurats on the plain of Shinar? What remains of the Egyptian Empire, when the mighty Amenhotep III reigned, but the massive ruins and museum relics of Thebes? The same might be asked of the Indus valley civilization of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa; of the Minoan civilization that left splendid palaces on Crete; of the glory that was Hellenistic Greece and the power that was imperial Rome. All these civilizations were once vital centers of human achievement. Today they live only in the imagination of the poets, archaeologists, and historians who feel impelled to decipher their secrets.¹

And now the ineluctable question: whither Western civilization? Is it too in decline, "botched," "an old bitch gone in the teeth"? Is its destiny to be abandoned because of some failure of nerve or shift in global power? Might it become silent, desiccated, and shrouded by creeping vines, its ruins peering out at future generations like the faces of Angkor Wat?

At first this must seem a curious apprehension. After all, the West is the most powerful civilization ever to impress the face of the earth. Its strength is reaffirmed in the fact that in recent decades it has sustained perhaps the greatest threat yet to its existence—atheistic totalitarianism: Marxism-Leninism is rotting from within and will collapse just as surely as fascism and Nazism were crushed from without. Dire military threats to the West's existence are not, for the time being, in the prognosis.

And yet, for many observers there lingers

the sense that the West—including America—is imperiled, not this time from the big bad Soviet bear, but from more insidious enemies within its heartland. It is against this menace in the heart of American thought, culture, and society that cultural critics war, now that external threats to the nation's existence are in retreat.

Conservative Cultural Criticism

In the intellectual commons of the West, one role of the cultural critic is to take the pulse of civilization and determine whether it is vital or faint. Conservative cultural critics in particular have found Western civilization to be less than robust. They have seen the spread of cultural and spiritual diseases growing out of such world-historical upheavals as the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and the Russian Revolution. They have watched the unfortunate effects of such intellectual movements as nominalism, the French Enlightenment, positivism, nihilism, fascism, Marxism-Leninism, and post-modernism. They have witnessed how destructive to human dignity is the loss of liberty, especially when sacrificed at the altar of that unearthly and unjust god, equality. They have realized that civilizational crises are not primarily political but metapolitical—crises in faith and values—so mere political tinkering or economic readjustment will not make them go away. Above all they have understood that every civilization is enlivened by a transcendent *vision*² of man's relation to the divine, to each other, to the self, and to nature; and that blurring or

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blinding this vision is foolhardy: for with the loss of man's responsibility to God, personal morality becomes problematic, and with the weakening of morality, positive social relations are undermined.

So prolific have conservative cultural critics been that they have contributed substantially to what might be called the decline-of-the-West genre. The roots of this genre can be traced back through the work of La Boétie, Bossuet, Burke, and Maistre. Twentieth-century contributions to the genre range from G.K. Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World?* (1910), to Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), to Russell Kirk's "A Culture's Road toward Avernus" (1988).

Despite their numerous warnings, conservative cultural critics have played the frustrating (and frustrated) role of the unheeded prophet. The Cassandras and Laocoöns of modern times, they typically go unnoticed by the *poloi*. Rarely do their works ascend such heights as the *New York Times* best-seller list. When they do find an audience, it is usually the remnant sitting in the amen corner. Persuading others to see it their way has not been easy. Why?

There are several reasons. First is the very problem cultural critics have been warning of—the breakdown of any shared cultural vision. In Nietzsche's wake, modernity's centrifugal forces have deconstructed any metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical system that might provide a framework for shared thought and action. As Paul Valéry observed, the West's disorder manifests in "the free coexistence, in all her cultivated minds, of the most dissimilar ideas, the most contradictory principles of life and learning."¹

As a result our public intellectuals speak past one another, so disparate are their world views. To Paul Kennedy the decline of the West is one thing, to Allan Bloom another, to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn something else. It is unfortunate that there is little real debate about what it means to be decadent. The idea has been thrown into a mulligan's stew of subjectivity—it is simply a matter of taste. Beyond a vague assent that it refers to "the process of falling away or declining from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity," there is no consensus about what consti-

tutes excellence, vitality, or prosperity. And here is the rub: the very notion of "falling away or declining" assumes a standard by which to measure the fall. In Nietzsche's wake, however, intellectuals are wary of (or embarrassed by) such archaisms as moral norms, metaphysical truth, or epistemological certitude—concepts in the absence of which cultural criticism waxes vapid.

Conservative cultural criticism has also been hampered by the superficial understanding of decadence among the public. Their notions no doubt derive from such "sword-and-sandals" extravaganzas as *Sodom and Gomorrah*, *Quo Vadis*, and *Ben Hur*. This lack of sophistication is not entirely the public's fault. The idea of decadence—unlike that of progress—is rarely indexed or treated in a systematic manner in the West's major reference books.¹ Access to the concept is strangely remote, considering the perennial interest the topic generates.

Which leads to the third reason conservative culture critics have had a hard time informing the public *mentalité*. Since the conservatives of every generation lament that things are getting worse, there is a legitimate skepticism of their perceptions. "Sooner or later," notes Jacques Barzun, "the sophisticated person who reads or hears that Western civilization is in decline reminds himself that to the living 'the times' always seem bad. In most eras voices cry out against the visible decadence; for every generation—and especially for the aging—the world is going to the dogs."²

It is obvious after a moment's reflection that a modicum of skepticism is needed in the face of these jeremiads. For if things are *always* getting worse, and every generation declares that the times are worse than they once were, then why has not the West maneuvered itself back into the Neanderthal valley or Lascaux cave?

Indeed, it is paradoxical that the most dour voices of decay often rise up when a culture is thriving. Throughout the West's history, vivid apprehensions of decadence have not infrequently accompanied brilliant achievements in art, literature, and philosophy. "What does not ruinous time degrade?" bewailed Horace during the magnificent reign of Augustus. "The age of our parents,

inferior to that of our grandparents, brought forth ourselves, who are more worthless still and are destined to have children still more corrupt." In the long perspective of history, we know that Horace was off the mark.

The perennial problem for conservative critics, then, is one of discernment. At any point in a people's history something is indeed falling—but is it the dregs of the past or civilization itself? For any cultural critic worth his salt, the distinction is crucial.

Defining Decadence with Rigor

Continual laments of decadence present a difficulty for avowedly conservative critics. On the one hand, they usually enter the colosseum of discourse facing a public predisposed to giving them the thumbs down; their articles, essays, and books are eaten alive to the glee of the academy's tenured radicals. On the other hand, the pervasive intellectual confusion over decadence offers conservative critics perhaps an unparalleled opportunity to make their case in the arena of intellectual life. There is the uneasy sense, as Martin D'Arcy observed, that *this* time the crises really are severe. The boy who cried wolf did, in the end, have a real problem; the villagers only discovered it too late. So conservative cultural criticism should not be written off just because of decadence-mongering in the past

If conservative critics can pin down the idea of decadence with rigor while at the same time avoiding the shrill tones that lesser talents have resorted to, then they may go far in setting the agenda for what it means for a civilization to decline. At one and the same time, critics need to treat the concept with a concreteness that will satisfy those whom William James called the tough-minded, and with an insight that will speak to the tender-minded. If American civilization is decadent, if the West is in decline, in precisely what ways can the critic show them to be so? Precisely how has it fallen from a previously higher state of existence, whether measured in social, cultural, moral, or religious terms?

Here aptitude—a sense of aptness—is needed. For the critic must use logic and evidence appropriate to whatever assertion is being made. There are a number of differ-

ent levels at which the decline of the West can be argued: sobering social data, knowledgeable testimony of the psychological and spiritual poverty of post-modernity, suggestive historical analogies, inferences drawn from the fine arts and popular culture, intuitive visions of what the decline of the West involves in its most subtle workings—all provide the means to make a compelling case that decadence is a threat we need to take seriously.

But before they can make their case, conservative cultural critics must continue to do what they have always done best: articulate the first principles, the standards, by which to perceive decline. The conservative mission in the twenty-first century is precisely that—to missionize—and to do so in the idiom that speaks to the public intellectuals at large. America's opinion makers must be shown a way to retreat from the edge of the abyss to which they have been seduced. They must be reoriented toward the first principles that have traditionally sustained Western cultures. They must hear that there is a transcendent moral order to which humans ought to try to conform; that cultural traditions and social institutions have been established through a long (and often painful) process of trial and error, and therefore ought not to be capriciously challenged; that society must balance order and freedom in a manner consistent with its traditions; that the best which has ever been written and spoken—the wisdom of our ancestors—ought to be jealously guarded and enthusiastically conveyed to the young; that human beings are imperfect and will not realize the millennium in this world; that humans, being the creation of God, are invested with an infinite dignity, and therein lies their true equality; that while men cannot live together without rules, only the bare minimum of laws should constrain human relations since liberty is necessary for the full development of the personality.⁶

The prior task of articulating first principles is not easy in the post-modern milieu. The very notion of norms, of first principles, of objective truths, is anathema to a generation that believes the Ten Commandments are Ten Suggestions. But it is a challenge that

cannot be allowed to go unmet. Only after the cultural critics' first principles win their fair share in the marketplace of ideas can they demonstrate how and to what extent the West has declined.

Redeeming Decadence

While critics are busy with these tasks, they should also show how their age, no matter how decadent, is redeemable. Rather than succumbing to apocalyptic despair on the one side or naive utopianism on the other, they can strive to discern how their crisis-ridden age can suggest lessons that, if learned, might eventuate in a better commonwealth.

St. Augustine of Hippo had this experience. After Alaric's sack of Rome in 410, Augustine coined a metaphor by which to express hope in a time of travail. His sermons were replete with an image that would have been familiar to north Africans in the fifth century: the process by which olives are transformed into oil. During the Mediterranean summer the olives hung thickly on sagging branches. At harvest time, workers would shake and beat down the olives, then crush them in an olive press, the *torcular*. "Now is the end of the year," Augustine preached to his flock, dismayed that the Eternal City had been sacked by Goths. "Now is the time to be pressed." This image, as Peter Brown has noted, encapsulates Augustine's vision of the meaning of the decline of Rome. The calamities of that age were the *pressuræ mundi*, the pressing of the human community. The results were painful but not without redeeming value. For through the pressing, good oil was set free.⁷ That is to say, a distinctly Christian Western civilization was being born.

In the twentieth century the German theologian Romano Guardini also speaks of the need to redeem the West's modern mistakes. In *The End of the Modern World*, Guardini writes:

My [book] has nothing in common ... with that cheap disposition which revels always in prophesying collapse or destruction. It has nothing in common with that desire which would surrender the valid achievements of modern man. Nor is my [book] linked with a longing for a romantically

envisioned Middle Ages or with an advance into a glorified utopia of the future. But this [book] ... will enable us both to understand and to master the meanings implicit in the new world that is upon us. That humanity was matured and deepened by its experience of the modern world cannot be denied.⁸

Behind the conservative cultural critic's perception of decline is the realization that civilization is not so much the material things that constitute it; it is not the libraries or church buildings or cities or legislative chambers per se. These are the outward manifestations of civilization. Civilization itself is invisible. It is above all a *way* of thinking, a *Weltanschauung*, an outlook. It lives in the minds of those who are—*civilized*. A.N. Whitehead, Christopher Dawson, Albert Schweitzer, and Arnold Toynbee all were correct to define the essence of a civilization in terms of the vision that animates it. The vision is, to use Whitehead's words, a "profound cosmological outlook, implicitly accepted, impressing its own type on the current springs of action."⁹

Traditionally the vision has been guarded by a small segment of the population that is free not only from the burden of producing food, but from engaging in any of the economic activities needed to keep society at the material level to which it is accustomed. These guardians are the priests, professional soldiers, administrators, and scholars. By common agreement they are supported by the producing members of society. Without their guardianship, the vision would dim, and the civilization would erode from within. Chaos in the soul would soon be mirrored in the disorder of the body politic. "The personal crises of behavior and feeling and life," writes Toynbee in *A Study of History*, "are the true essence and origin of the visible manifestations of social collapse."¹⁰

Hence decadence ultimately entails the process of falling away from the vision that orders man's relation to the divine, to the community, to the self, to nature. In the Western context, it signifies a lessening of the hold on the imagination of all that inspires human beings to be devout in their religion, of service to their fellows, true to their con-

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science, and conscientious in their stewardship of nature.

Thus far in this essay I have put forward tasks that young conservative cultural critics like myself must undertake at the beginning of their careers. To recapitulate briefly, they must, first, continue to articulate the standard by which to see decadence; second, show with rigor how America and the West have in fact declined; and third, find ways of redeeming decay rather than surrendering to it. To these three tasks we can add a fourth: conserve the West's vision, keep it in focus. The Western vision is the fruit of the Judeo-Christian experience being grafted onto Greco-Roman civilization, which in turn is bearing fruit, among other places, in the American experiment with ordered freedom.

Readers of this journal do not have to be told that the West's vision is now being assailed, from within, by the new barbarians: by church leaders who openly question divine Revelation; by professors who have adopted the nihilistic presuppositions of post-modernism; by educators who put learning about condoms on a par with reading, writing, and arithmetic; by governors who seek their own aggrandizement at the expense of the common good; by legislators who sponsor laws that show little regard for human dignity and life; by judges whose sentences leave justice outraged; by artists whose works degrade the human being, the community, the divine; by entertainers who will pander to any sensation for the sake of profit; by those businessmen who wantonly destroy nature for quick gains. These are the real enemies of Western civilization. Our mission is not abroad, but right here at home.

I have chosen to labor in the vineyard of modern European and American intellectual history because, besides enjoying the work, I am in a strategic position to influence the next generation or two. One of my tasks is to help university students understand just what

the Western vision is; another is to help them recognize just what historical processes have blurred and blinded our knowledge of that vision over the centuries. I can think of few more challenging undertakings. In the words of Goethe:

What you have as heritage,
Take now as task;
For thus will you make it your own!

¹It is interesting to note that of the 34 civilizations Toynbee identifies, only 16 still exist. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, revised ed. (New York, 1972), 72.

²Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (New York, 1956), 41.

³Paul Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind," *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (New York, 1962), 27.

⁴The term is not even a key word in such works as *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the *Great Books Synopticon*, the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, or the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. One will not find "decadence" indexed in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, or *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*. There is only one entry apiece in Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren's *Great Treasury of Western Thought* and George Seldes's *The Great Thoughts*.

⁵Jacques Barzun, *The Culture We Deserve* (Middletown, Conn., 1989), 161.

⁶For this summary of first principles, I am indebted to Russell Kirk, Introduction, *The Portable Conservative Reader* (Harmondsworth, 1982), xv-xviii; and Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law* (London, 1939).

⁷Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, 1969), 292-93.

⁸Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World: A Search for Orientation*. Introduction by Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, trans. Joseph Theman and Herbert Burke (London, 1957), 69.

⁹Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (Cambridge, England, 1933), 13-14.

¹⁰*A Study of History*, 43-46. Quotation, 241.