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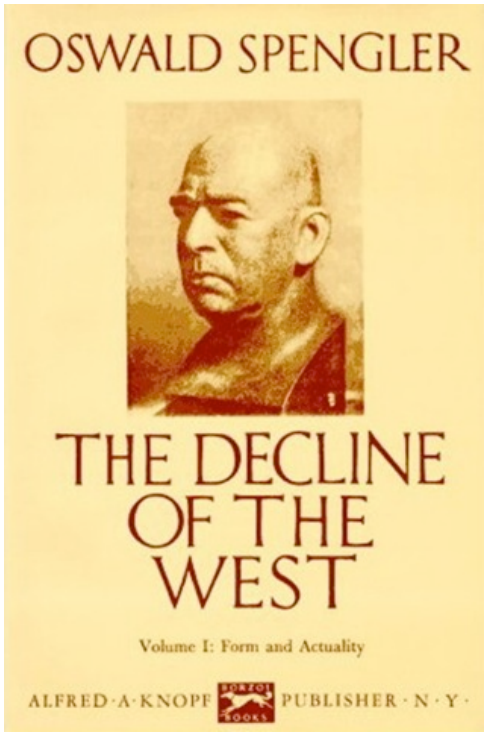

SPENGLER, THE SPENGLERITES AND SPENGLERISM

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Part 1 of 2

[The popular curiosity about the work of Spengler suggests that the following articles may serve a useful purpose in orienting those who have only encountered eulogies or brief dismissals of his system. The first deals critically with its historical and philosophical claims; the second considers the social setting in which the book made its appearance in Germany.-ED.]

Last winter there was published in London and New York a book entitled *Civilization or Civilizations,* and subtitled by its authors "An Essay on the Spenglerian Philosophy of History". Dr. F. C. S. Schiller wrote an Introduction to the book, in which he concluded that "English readers may confidently be recommended to embark on the exploration of the Spenglerian philosophy of history under the able guidance of Mr. Goddard and Mr. Gibbons."

The volume, I trust, has long since been received in the infernal circle that Dante should have apportioned for books that "sin against reason." On its own account it is worth little attention, and certainly no serious criticism. But it does perform a rare service in relation to its intellectual source, the first volume of *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler (London: Allen and Unwin; New York: Knopf; 1926), an authorized translation with notes by Charles Francis Atkinson. It furnishes concrete exemplification of what happens when an elaborate and grandiloquently presented doctrine, such as Spengler's, is restated, denuded of its intricacy for popularization. In this example one can see the archetype of the relation between the author of any "great original idea "that has imaginative power and the cult of his disciples. It is with such cults of followers and interpreters in mind that one becomes almost captiously critical of an Ouspensky or a Keyserling or a Spengler. And not without justice! For while Spengler is vastly superior in the dignity and variety of his presentation, and in the impressive extent of his scholarship, to all the salon conversation and all the proselytizing commentary he has generated, the crudely jointed skeleton of ideas that can be so readily discerned in the thread-bare patchwork of the Goddard and Gibbons version is, nevertheless, the same structure that Spengler himself drapes more skillfully.

Narcotic immersion wider the flow of heavy words which sometimes becomes a torrent of encyclopaedic references, may have prevented the reader of *The Decline of the West* from appreciating too clearly the structural schema of the Spenglerian philosophy of history. The reader was probably too occupied with considering—perhaps weighing—the myriad analogies, pronouncing,—perhaps remembering,—the strange names of unfamiliar persons and places, and acquiring the technical vocabulary used to salute the *world-as-history*, to be equally considerate of the logical phases of the mere argument: its assumptions, its procedure step by step, and its criteria of demonstration. But all this is readily discoverable in the formulation of Spenglerism by his disciples, and upon inspection of such a tract as *Civilization or Civilizations,* a set of simple rules can be stated which form the prescription for construing the

history of any possible world *a la Spengler*.

(1) From an observation of the historical past, derive a few sweeping generalizations concerning the succession of epochs in any civilization.

(2) Define these epochs in hard and fast terms so that such phrases as "empire period," "stage of feudalism," "nineteenth century" and "decadence" must always mean the same whenever and wherever applied.

(3) Analyze out of the sum of all historical records nine distinct civilizations (Spengler treats only six), and keep them separate and distinct even though they overlap geographically and ethnologically, and are causally interdependent.

(4) So date the rise and fall of these civilizations that each of them lasts the mystic length of 1600 years, divisible properly into nine important epochs, each adamantly defined according to Rule 2. Thus, for instance, every one of these civilizations must have a "nineteenth century "which always occurs 300 years before the final dissolution of that civilization, and which always accompanies the rise of the "bourgeoisie," so defined that it means the same in China and Arabia as in Europe.

(5) Then construct a chart in which are exhibited the parallel phases of the nine civilizations in each of the nine epochs with regard to form of government, type of thought, and kind of art. This is a sort of comparative cultural graph, easily made if the terms are chosen arbitrarily enough, and if enough facts are ignored.

(6) One thing more is required before the great law can be derived. It is necessary to discover, or invent, the "general idea" or "form principle" of each civilization, and to hypostatize this intuitively-apprehended principle by affixing to it an impressive name. Thus the general idea of Mesopotamian culture is called "Arabian;" or "Magian;" of the Greek, "Apollinian;" of Western Europe, "Faustian." Each of these general names signifies extremely definite characteristics so that when a certain group of traits peculiar to one of these civilizations occurs within the borders of another civilization, it is called a "Magian" event, even though it takes place in Rome or Pergamum. A subsidiary rule (6A) is necessary and relevant here, the rule of "pseudomorphosis" which allows you to insist that the development of one culture can be masked by the superimposition of another, and thus enables you to deal with many more recalcitrant and obstinately

uncongenial facts than you could have otherwise handled.

(7) Finally, one pronounces on all history so articulated and set forth, the "law of civilization." All civilizations pass through the same orbit of growth and decline, and in every respect their careers present concrete cultural analogies which make possible the prediction of the future, as well as the historical imagination of what the unknown past must have been. "Spengler's law of civilization bestows on us, if only we understand it rightly, the power of prophecy in history. Once it is grasped in its essence, we may trace in the details ourselves and find in the past, dark and fragmentary as it may appear, many of the factors without which any civilization would be incomplete. We can argue that the future, dark and conjectural though it is, may be expected to repeat certain features, invariably exhibited by the civilizations of which we can survey the total history." And, of course, the crucial point is that, according to this law, Western Civilization is at the margin of its decadence.

The actual facts do not really matter. The *a posteriori* historical generalizations having been inverted unconsciously into absolute *a priori* regulative principles of historical change, they can no longer be seriously contradicted by other empirical facts which had been previously ignored. For instance, the adduction of diverse causes of the Renaissance is irrelevant, for "the Renaissance would have occurred even if there had been no Greece, even if Athens had as little influence on Europe as on Peking." The law of civilization holds entirely, not only contrary to fact, but even where there are no facts to support any inferences whatsoever. In many instances, it is admitted that there is no evidence for all of the civilizations being compared with respect to a certain phase of development, and yet the law holds for each and all of them, because it is not derived from the facts but imposed upon them.

Of course, there are facts and facts; and the argument seems to depend for its cogency upon the dogmatic statement of at least two questionable "facts" to a page. Here and there brave, omniscient gestures supplement the factual fictions, such statements as the following in a tone of assurance that defies challenge: "At the beginning of the eighteenth century, religion and accepted beliefs fall into a state of decay, and are despised by the more advanced philosophical thinkers; but philosophy itself, as well as science, leads to blank negation." Exceptions to any of these generalizations are summarily dismissed as follows: "Once we have grasped how art develops and what is the fundamental symbol of Europe, we can work out the whole details for ourselves; there are necessarily

some apparent exceptions and contradictions, but further examination will find that they are either unimportant or the result of momentary distortion." A perfect immunization against criticism!

The last and most important phase of the technique is the drawing of manifold cultural analogies, such as between Roman stoics Confucians, and European Socialists; between Greek music and the "Marche Militaire;" between Pythagoras, Mohammed and Cromwell, and so forth. If you rise up to deny the meaning or validity of any of the innumerable analogies of the same ilk, the Spenglerites warn you that you are falling into "the traps of the false analogies which have deceived critics of art"—who have not been properly indoctrinated. Mr. Goddard and Mr. Gibbons should be warned that the making of analogies is like living in glass houses, and only he who is without them should throw the first stone.

Lest it be objected, on the one hand, that this is unfair parody, or on the other, that the satire may be relevant to the pronouncements of the like of Goddard and Gibbons, but not to Spengler himself, I have made a collection of paragraphs and sentences from both books. They are hereby appended, first a set of curios from Goddard and Gibbons, and then a gallery of exhibition pieces from Spengler.

I do not assert that these quotations prove anything whatsoever; but I do offer that an examination of these carefully selected and assorted specimens,—and of the many more that have been left *in situ* on the hundreds of pages still intact,—will certainly provide the exemplary material and the authentic manner to guide any one who wishes to construct a history according to the plans submitted. There is, furthermore, much enlightenment to be gathered from the contrast between Spengler and his disciples, when placed in such unholy proximity. The sacred becomes infected with the profane, and those who in their first reading held Spengler sacrosanct may now be forced to rub their eyes.

Finally, I do not claim that each of these paragraphs or citations contains some *schrecklichkeit* of scholarship, or some patent absurdity, or some unabashed dogmatism. Most of them do, of course, but I shall not assert it; for what I do claim, and report, is merely that in each of these pieces there is at least a smile, though sometimes a sad one!

Despite the recent work of Ellsworth Huntingdon—

> "Buckle's ideas on civilization have long been discarded. Cli-

> matic and other environmental conditions will not account for much in the activities of mankind." (G-G, 51).

Despite the fact that Heraclitus talks of "the upward and the downward paths," and Parmenides wrote a poem concerning the three ways of life

> "Like ourselves the Greek looked for no law and no way, in the manner of the Indian. Such laws as he discovered were the result of his critical intelligence working on the facts of the world." (G-G, 59).

Despite the "fact "that Plato does "escape from the concrete "at times

> "Typical of the Greek is his achievement in geometry, which of all sciences is that which can be called concrete, limited and yet beautiful. To sum up the Greek "idea "is impossible, yet the words "concrete beauty "as the ideal, and "concrete form "as the average Greek feeling are not far from the truth. If Plato can escape from the concrete at times, the average man was nearer to Aristotle's Politics than to Plato's Republic. (G-G, 60).

The "form principle" of the Classical is concreteness, and yet we find—

> "Heraclitus was similarly impressed by fire and built up a theory of the Logos which no one has understood." (G-G, 90). "The Greek throughout his culture preferred abstract thought, even though it was living, to the study of concrete facts. From this aspect, Western Europe is infinitely superior to the others. The European is willing to leave philosophy to others while he investigates the fact." (G-G, 92). But "Western Europe refuses to be concrete with the Greek or magical and definite with the Arabian (i.e., the Magian); it has no boundaries to its science or to its thought except those which are placed by nature *or by* its intellectual capacity. . . . Beyond the concrete and the algebraic x it passes to conceptions so intellectually absurd as $\sqrt{-1}$." (G-G, 65). *And still*—"In a more practical aspect the fundamental idea of Western culture may be said to be the search after truth. This is, in a sense, a particularly Greek quality. Greek thought was daring in its absence of restriction and magnificent in some of its conclusions, but in the search for truth it exhibited one great fault—it neglected facts. Ionian and Eleatic philosophy seized on some natural phenomenon which it ob-

> served, and instead of investigating its nature proceeded to deduce from its supposed characteristics a theory of the whole universe . . . . In fact, the Greek saw in truth a subsidiary form of beauty and constructed *philosophies* much as he constructed statues; that is, on artistic principles, and while his artistic intuitive spirit penetrated far into the dim mysteries of the real and universal, it had no clear conception of what it had to perceive. It saw life whole, but never saw it clear. This is in exact contrast to the Western European." (G-G, 66-67.)

On the other hand, when the Western European is "scholastic "it can be said that—

> "Scholasticism is in fact typical of the efforts of the fettered human mind when it is accidentally faced with great and vitally important problems, and the struggle between the realists and nominalists in Europe is similar to the Trinitarian controversy in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. The Arabian pseudomorphosis exhausted its intellect in endless discussions about the Logos and the substances, while the Westerns debated the question of universals. In both cases, however, the result is purely negative and has no meaning for the advance of civilization." (G-G, 79). *And*—"in the end the mediaeval man, though he made God in his own image and expressed in Him his deepest feelings, could not understand God; however much he made God into something like himself, there was still a mystery about Him, and he never felt himself secure without the power of the priest." (G-G, 81).

Despite the statement that "Avicenna in the tenth century is almost as encyclopedic as Aristotle" and despite Averroes, it must be said that—

> "Arabian civilization was by its nature debarred from philosophy in any such form as the Greek." (G-G, 99).

Modern philosophy receives startling exegesis—

> "Descartes' scepticism is parallel to that of some of the sophists—not to that of the Pyrrhonists—but his '*cogito ergo sum*' is a strong assertion of the practical side of Europe. . . There is far more likeness between Kant and Plato than between Pascal and Protagoras. It is Berkeley with his subjective idealism who parallels Protagoras with his relativism; and Kant, like Aristotle, the last of the great original philosophers, went over the ground so far covered by humanity, and for the last time was

> able to reach a conclusion which avoided scepticism. For the future, philosophy was either transcendental and mystical, as in the Stoics and Hegelian, or pure philosophic doubt as in the Pyrrhonists and Agnostics." (G-G. 101-102).

In the field of the arts we find, despite the contemporaneity of Pericles, Phidias and the Parthenon, that—

"In those civilizations where architecture is not the most typical art, i.e., everywhere but Egypt, it reaches its highest form about 200 *years* before the highest point in politics is attained." (G-G, 113.-114)

And analogies, with implied value-judgments, are easily drawn

> "Egypt from 1800-1700 B.C., Greece from 500-350 B.C., Arabia from A.D. 700-850 (in Byzantine, Italian and Moorish art), Europe from A.D. 1600-1750, all mark an advance which is quite clearly defined as the height. Fifty years more, and in each case the best is over, and in place of Phidias, Scopas, of Bach, Beethoven; just as we have Alexander in place of Pericles, Louis XVIII in place of Louis XIV, and in place of the greatness of Puritan thought and philosophic originality, the dullness of rationalism and academic hair-splitting….. We can discuss Beethoven or Praxiteles much better than Phidias and Bach, less well than Strauss or Pergamene sculptors." (G-G, 123-124). "If Bach may be compared to the Parthenon, the Erechtheion is Beethoven." (G-G, 129). "Though to some of us Phidias appears the finest sculptor in the world, there is little doubt that he had not yet reached the summit; that glory must be reserved for Polyclitus or Praxiteles. We are really not able to judge, because sculpture is not the art in which Western Europeans feel the highest satisfaction, and there is bound to be more difference of opinion. But in any case, the series of sculptors, which runs from Alcamenes to Lysippus, corresponds to the series of great musicians which ends with Mozart or perhaps Beethoven. Polyclitus had laid down the canon, though he departed from it himself. Praxitilcs had definitely reached perfection of technique, though sometimes his skill led to weakness as it did with Mozart. Lysippus tried to return to the strict form and tradition, in the same sort of way as Aristotle in philosophy reacted against the comparative weakness of Plato." (G-G, 130-131).

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