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## SPENGLER, THE SPENGLERITES AND SPENGLERISM

**Mortimer J. Adler**

Part 2 of 2

And the nineteenth century, always being the beginning of decadence, it is clear that—

“There was nothing more to say after the days of Brahms and Wagner; even they are far from the perfection of 100 years earlier. They are nineteenth century. It is in the fugue and in strict counterpoint that Western music finds its most satisfying expression, and all the more rigid forms are developed on those

lines, and it is by these means that the musician can get the furthest away from the everyday things. Strictly there is no emotion in Western music, if we accept the word emotion in its ordinary sense. That there is emotion in Bach, everyone must admit who has heard the “Largo of the Concerto “for two violins in D minor; but there is an impassable gulf between that and the emotion of Wagner at his worst. The one is transcendent, the other gross; Bach felt within him the metaphysical urge of the civilization, Wagner always tended to express his petty personal emotions.” (G-G, 138).

With an equal degree of humility and intellectual prudence, it may be asserted that—

“The Romans themselves were everything that the Greeks were not. Their thought was borrowed from Greece and mostly mutilated in the borrowing, so that Stoicism became a cast iron puritanism of ‘antique Cato’, and Epicureanism a licence for the life of pleasure lived by the ‘hogs of Epicurus’ ‘stye’.” (G-G, 182).

From all of which, and much, much more that is of the same sort, it is concluded that

“Everything that can conceivably have any ultimate value is tending to disappear. Everything in connection with truth, beauty and goodness takes a back place, and its position is filled by the desire for pleasure and material prosperity, by the gladiatorial displays, and the unrivalled licence and luxury of Rome, and the baseball matches and the millionaire existence of America. Science, art and ideals, are therefore nearing their end.” (G-G, 191-192).

If now we turn to the Master himself, we shall find a certain dignity of style and elevation of manner, but withal the same extraordinary power of generalization. For instance—

“It was not the Latin, but the German peoples of the West and America who developed out of the steam engine a big industry that transformed the face of the land. The relation of these phenomena to Stoicism and to Socialism is unmistakable. Not till the Roman Caesarism—foreshadowed by C. Flaminius, shaped first by Marius, handled by strong-minded, large scale men of fact—did the Classical World learn the *pre-eminence of money*. Without this fact neither Caesar nor ‘Rome’ generally, is understandable. In every Greek there is a Don Quixote, in

every Roman a Sancho Pansa factor, and these factors are dominants.” (S, 36).

“Not in entire forgetfulness but trailing clouds of glory do we come”—

In this work to sketch out this unphilosophical philosophy—the last that West Europe will know. Scepticism is the expression of a pure Civilization; and it dissipates the world-picture of the Culture that has gone before. For us, its success will lie in resolving all the older problems into one, the genetic. The thinkers of the past conceived external actuality as produced by cognition and motivating ethical judgments, but to the thought of the future they are above all *expressions and symbols*. *The Morphology of world-history becomes inevitably a universal symbolism.*” (S, 45-46).

Which is followed by a confession that should help the reader to evaluate much that follows, especially Spengler’s appreciation of Aristotle and Plato.

“The philosophy of this book I owe to the philosophy of Goethe, which is practically unknown today, and also (but in far less degree) to that of Nietzsche. The position of Goethe in West-European meta-physics is still not understood in the least, nevertheless he was a philosopher. His place vis-a-vis Kant is the same as that of Plato—who similarly eludes the would-be-systematizer—vis-a-vis Aristotle. Plato and Goethe stand for the philosophy of Becoming, Aristotle and Kant for the philosophy of Being.” (S, 49, footnote).

Attention of psychologists is called to the relation between the mathematical instinct and the instinct for ceremonials.

“The Australian natives, who rank intellectually as thorough primitives, possess a mathematical instinct (or, what conies to the same thing, a power of thinking in numbers which is not yet communicable by signs or words) that as regards the interpretation of pure space is far superior to that of the Greeks. Their discovery of the boomerang can only be attributed to their having a sure feeling for numbers of the class that we should refer to the higher geometry. *Accordingly*—we shall justify the adverb later—they possess an extraordinarily complicated ceremonial and, for expressing degrees of affinity, such fine shades of language as not even the higher Cultures themselves can show. There is analogy, again, between the Euclid-

ean mathematic and the absence, in the Greek of the mature Periclean age, of any feeling for ceremonial public life or for loneliness, while the Baroque, differing sharply from the Classical, presents us with a mathematic of spatial analysis, a court of Versailles, and a state system resting on dynastic relations.” (S, 58).

With sudden relief we discover that the long sought secret of Plato’s “doctrine of Ideas “is a repressed Oedipus complex.

“Stiff forms are the negation of life, formulae and laws spread rigidity over the face of nature, numbers make dead—and the “Mothers “of Faust II sit enthroned, majestic and withdrawn . Gothic draws very near to Plato in this divination of one of the final secrets. For his unapproachable Mothers are Plato’s Ideas—the possibilities of a spirituality, the unborn forms to be realized as active and purposed Culture, as art, thought, polity and religion, in a world ordered and determined by that spirituality.” (S, 70).

Although we have no knowledge of the method of research of the Greek Atomists, it can be concluded nevertheless that

“The existence of the Classical soul is the *condition* for the appearance of Democritus’s method, the existence of the Faustian soul for that of Newton’s.” (S, 119).

The distinction between the Classical and the Faustian Destiny-Idea conditions similarly the difference between Shakespeare and Sophocles.

“Lear is at the last a mere name, the axis of something unbounded. This conception of destiny is the ‘infinitesimal’ conception. It stretches out into infinite time and infinite space. It touches the bodily. Euclidean existence not at all, but affects only the soul Consider the mad King between the fool and out-cast in the storm on the heath, and then look at the Laocoon group; the first is the Faustian the other the Apollinian way of suffering. Sophocles, too, wrote a Laocoon drama, and we may be certain that there was nothing of *pure soul-agony* in it.” (S. 129).

It is the form of the soul, and not a knowledge of mechanics, and a power over materials that determines architectural change, for—

“The Magian and the Faustian souls, on the contrary, built

high. Their dream images became concrete as vaultings above significant inner spaces, structural anticipations respectively of the mathematic of algebra and that of analysis. In the style that radiated from Burgundy and Flanders rib-vaulting with its lunettes and flying buttresses emancipated the contained space from the sense-appreciable surface bounding it. When windows were in practise indispensable, they were for the sake of artistic impression concealed by galleries as in the Eastern basilica. The *window as architecture*, on the other hand, is peculiar to the Faustian soul and the most significant symbol of its depth-experience.” (S, 199).

The symbol of the Euclidean (i.e. Classical) soul, furthermore determined the choice of colours in Greek decoration.

“Blue and green are the colours of the heavens, the sea, the fruitful plain, the shadow of the Southern noon, the evening, the remote mountains. They are essentially atmospheric and not substantial colours. They are *cold*, they disembody, and they evoke impressions of expanse and distance and boundlessness. For this reason they were kept out of the frescoes of Polygnotus. And for this reason also, an ‘infinitesimal’ blue-green is the space-creating element throughout the history of our perspective oil-painting, from the Venetians right down to the 19th century; it is the basic and supremely important tone which supports the ensemble of the intended colour-effect, as the *basso-continuo* supports the orchestra. . . . The most significant use of dusky green as the colour of destiny is Grunewald’s. The indescribable power of apace in his nights is equalled only by Rembrandt’s. And the thought suggests itself here, is it possible to say that his bluish-green, the colour in which the interior of a great cathedral is so often clothed, is the specifically *Catholic* colour?—it being understood that we mean by ‘Catholic’ strictly the Faustian Christianity . . . . (S, 245, 248-247).

Colour has been more significant in symbolizing civilizations and souls than is generally suspected.

“Brown then became the characteristic colour of the soul, and more particularly of a historically-disposed soul. Nietzsche has, I think, spoken somewhere of the “brown” music of Bizet, but the adjective is far more appropriate to the music which Beethoven wrote for strings and to the orchestration that even as late as Bruckner so often fills space with a brown-golden expanse of tone. All other colours are relegated to ancillary func-

tions—thus the bright yellow and the vermilion of Vermeer intrude with the spatial almost as though from another world, and with an emphasis that is truly metaphysical, and the yellow-green and blood-red lights of Rembrandt seen at most to play with the symbolism of space.” (S, 2624).

But colour no more than ruins—

“Nothing was further from the Classical mind than this reverence for the weather-beaten evidences of a once and a formerly. It cleared out of sight everything that did not speak of the present; never was the old preserved because it was old. . Their action was quite in keeping with the style of a culture that raised cremation to the rank of a major symbol and refused with scorn to bind daily life to chronology. *Our* choice has usually been the opposite. The heroic landscape of the Claude Lorrain type is inconceivable without ruins. The English park with its atmospheric suggestion, which supplanted the French about 1750 and abandoned the perspective idea of the latter in favour of the “Nature “of Addison, Pope and sensibility, introduced into its stock of motives the most astonishing *bizarrierie* ever perpetuated, the *artificial ruin* in order to deepen the historical character in the presented landscape.”(S, 254).

And now, in some degree, a summary—

“The opposition of Apollinian and Faustian ideals of Humanity may now be stated concisely. Art and Portrait are to one another as body and space, instant and history, foreground and background, Euclidean and analytical number, proportion and relation. The Statue is rooted in the ground, Music (and the Western portrait is music, soul-woven of colour tones) invades and pervades space without limit. The fresco-painting is tied to the wall, trained on it, but the oil-painting, the “picture” on canvas or board or other table, is free from limitations of place. The Apollinian form language reveals only the become, the Faustian shows above all a becoming.” (S, 266).

No wonder then that in a Faustian civilization such as this, Mariolatry occurred and also Mother’s Day!

“Endless Becoming is comprehended in the idea of *Motherhood*, Woman as Mother is Time, is Destiny. Just as the mysterious act of depth-experience fashions, out of sensation, extension and world, so through motherhood the bodily man is made an individual member of this world, in which thereupon he *has*

a Destiny. All symbols of Time and Distance are symbols of maternity. *Care* is the root-feeling of future, and all care is motherly.” (S, 267).

But becoming is not forever fruitful for—

“The bitter conclusion is that it is all irretrievably over with the arts of form of the West. The crisis of the 19th century was the death-struggle. Like the Apollinian, the Egyptian, and every other, the Faustian art dies of senility, having actualized its inward possibilities and fulfilled its mission within the course of its Culture. What is practised as art today—be it music after Wagner or painting after Cezanne, Leibl or Menzel—is impotence and falsehood.” (S, 293).

Students of Spinoza will be interested to learn that the soul of their philosopher really represents in itself a pseudo-morphosis—

“Child of the Ghetto, he is, with his contemporary Schirazi, the last belated representative of the Magian, a stranger in the form-world of the Faustian feeling. As a prudent pupil of the Baroque he contrived to clothe his system in the colours of Western thought, but at bottom he stands entirely under the aspect of the Arabian dualism of two soul-substances. *And this is the true and inward reason why he lacked the force-concept of Galileo and Descartes.* This concept is the centre of gravity of a dynamic universe, and *ipso facto* is alien to the Magian world-feeling. There is no link between the idea of the Philosopher’s Stone (which is implicit in Spinoza’s ideas of Deity as *causa sui*) and the causal necessity of *our* Nature-picture. Consequently his determinism is precisely that which the orthodox wisdom of Baghdad had maintained—“Kismet”. It was there that the home of the *more geometrico* method was to be looked for—it is common to the Talmud, the Zend Avesta and the Arabian Kalaam’ but its appearance in Spinoza’s “Ethics” is a grotesque freak in *our* philosophy.” (S, 307).

But this is no more startling that what can be learned about Descartes in his relation to the Faustian soul-form.

“It is common ground for Descartes and Parmenides that thinking and being, i.e. imagined and extended, are identical. “*Cogito, ergo sum*” is simply the formulation of the depth-experience—I cognize and therefore I am in space. But in the style of this cognizing and therefore of the cognition product, the prime-symbol of the particular Culture comes into play.

The perfect extension of the Classical consciousness is one of sensuous and bodily presence.” (S, 387).

Probably, it was the Egoism of the Faustian soul, as well as its characteristic depth-experience, which prompted Descartes to say “I” think, for—

“To call the Faustian culture a *Will-Culture* is only another way of expressing the eminently historical disposition of its soul. Our first-person idiom, our “ego habeo factum”—our dynamic syntax, that is, faithfully renders the “way of doing things “that results from this disposition and, with its positive directional energy, dominates not only our picture of the World-as-History but our own history to boot. This first person towers up in Gothic architecture; the spire is an “I,” the flying buttress is an “I.” And therefore, the *entire Faustian ethic* from Thomas Aquinas to Kant is an “*excelsior*”—fulfilment of an “I,” ethical work upon an “I,” justification of an “I” by faith and works; respect of the neighbour “Thou “for the sake of one’s “I,” and its happiness; and lastly and supremely, immortality of the “I.” (S, 309).

Despite the appellation of Heraclitus as “the Dark” —

“Every high creator in Western history had in reality aimed, from first to last, at something which only the few could comprehend. . . Think of Giordan Bruno, or Leibniz or Kant, as against Anaximander, Heraclitus, or Protagoras. What does it mean, that no German philosopher worth mentioning can be understood by the man in the street, and that the combination of simplicity with majesty that is Homer’s is simply not to be found in any Western language. . . On the contrary every Attic burgher belonged to the Attic Culture, which excluded nobody; and consequently the distinctions of deeps and shallows which are so decisively important for us, did not exist at all for it. For us, popular and shallow are synonymous—in art as in science—but for Classical man it was not so.” (S, 327-328).

And as a compensation for this breach between the profound and the popular, the Faustian Culture has journalism—

“Diatribes belong necessarily to the ‘religion of the irreligious’, and is the characteristic form that the ‘cure of souls’ takes therein. It appears as the Indian preaching, the Classical rhetoric and the Western journalism. It appeals not to the best but to the most, and it values its means according to the number of




successes obtained by them. It substitutes for the old thoughtfulness an *intellectual male-prostitution* by speech and writing, which fills and dominates the halls and market-places of the megalopolis. As the whole of Hellenistic philosophy is rhetorical, so the social-ethic system of Zola's novel and Ibsen's drama is journalistic." (S, 360).

And as the journalism grows yellow and sere, we reach an end—

“The great century of the Classical science was the third, after the death of Aristotle; when Archimedes died, and the Romans came, it was already almost at its end. Our great century has been the 19th. Savants of the calibre of Gauss and Humboldt and Helmholtz were already no more by 1900. In physics as in chemistry, in biology as in mathematics, the great masters are dead, and we are now experiencing the *decrecendo* of brilliant gleaners who arrange, collect, and finish-off like the Alexandrian scholars of the Roman age. Everything that does not belong to the matter-of-fact side of life—to politics, techniques or economics—exhibits the common symptom. After Lysippus no great sculptor, no artist as man-of-destiny, appears, and after the Impressionists no painter, and after Wagner no musician. The age of Caesarism needed neither art nor philosophy. To Eratosthenes and Archimedes, true creators, succeed Posidonius and Pliny, collectors of taste, and finally Ptolemy and Galen, mere copyists. And, just as oil painting and instrumental music ran through their possibilities in a few centuries, so also dynamics, which began to bud about 1600, is to-day in the grip of decay.”

“But before the curtain falls, there is one more task for the historical Faustian spirit, a task not yet specified, hitherto not even imagined possible. There has still to be written a *morphology of the exact sciences*, which shall discover how all laws concepts and theories inwardly hang together as forms and what they have meant as such in the life course of the Faustian Culture. . . The uniting of the several scientific aspects into one will bear all the marks of the great art of counterpoint. *As infinitesimal music of the boundless world-space*—that is the deep unresting longing of this soul, as the orderly, statuesque and Euclidean Cosmos was the satisfaction of the Classical. That—formulated by a logical necessity of Faustian reason as a dynamic-imperative causality then developed into a dictatorial, hard-working, world-transforming sciences is the grand legacy of the Faustian soul to the souls of Cultures yet to be a bequest of immensely transcendent forms that the heirs will possibly

ignore. And then, weary after its striving, the Western science returns to its spiritual home.” (S. 424-425. 427-428). 

*Fiat!*

Columbia University, published in *Psyche*, Volume 29, July 1927, pp. 73-84.

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