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Author(s): Northrop Frye

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NORTHROP FRYE

The Decline of the West
by Oswald Spengler

IN JULY, 1918, when the German armies were on the point of collapse, a book appeared called *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, by someone called Oswald Spengler. I use that phrase because Spengler then was nobody in particular, an *Oberlehrer* or *Gymnasium* teacher who had thrown up his job in 1910 in order to write, whose health was so bad he was never called up for military service even in the warm-body months of 1918, and who was so poor he could hardly buy enough food or clothing, much less books. Anonymity was a serious handicap in a country where scholars were ranked in a quasi-military hierarchy, and Spengler's book was refused by many publishers before being brought out in a small edition. Within a year it was one of the most widely read and discussed books in Europe, and Spengler began to revise and expand it. He was decoyed into other projects before he completed his masterwork, but finally did complete it with a second volume, as long and detailed as the first. The second volume, however, adds relatively little to the essential argument, though it provides more documentation. In 1926 an English translation of the first volume by C. F. Atkinson, called *The Decline of the West*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf, the second volume appearing in 1928. It is an admirable translation, with many helpful footnotes added by the translator. In English there is an excellent study of Spengler by H. Stuart Hughes (1952). It is a short book, but even so it takes in a much wider sweep of argument than I can take here: I am concerned only with *The Decline of the West* as a "revisited classic."

The philosophical framework of Spengler's argument is a Romantic one, derived ultimately from Fichte's adaptation of Kant. The objective world, the world that we know and perceive, the phenomenal world, is essentially a spatial world: it is the domain of Nature explored by science and mathematics, and so far as it is so explored, it is a mechanical world, for when living things are seen objectively they are seen as

mechanisms. Over against this is the world of time, organism, life and history. The essential reality of this world eludes the reasoner and experimenter: it is to be attained rather by feeling, intuition, imaginative insight, and, above all, by symbolism. The time in which this reality exists is a quite different time from the mechanical or clock time of science, which is really a dimension of space. It follows that methods adequate for the study of nature are not adequate for the study of history. The true method of studying living forms, Spengler says, is by analogy, and his whole procedure is explicitly and avowedly analogical. The problem is to determine what analogies in history are purely accidental, and which ones point to the real shape of history itself. Thanks to such works as Bernard Lonergan's *Insight* (1957), we know rather more about the positive role of analogy in constructive thought than was generally known in 1918, and it is no longer possible to dismiss Spengler contemptuously as "mystical" or "irrational" merely because his method is analogical. He may be, but for other reasons.

Everything that is alive shows an organic rhythm, moving through stages of birth, growth, maturity, decline and eventual death. If this happens to all individual men without exception, there is surely no inherent improbability in supposing that the same organic rhythm extends to larger human units of life. In Spengler's day, philosophy was still largely dominated by the Cartesian model of the individual perceiver completely detached from his social context. But this is an unreal abstraction, however useful as a heuristic principle; man also perceives as a representative of a larger social unit. The next step is to identify that unit. Spengler finds that it is not the nation, which is too shifting and fluctuating to be a unit, not the race (though he wobbles on this point, for reasons to be examined presently), not the class, which is a source mainly of limitation and prejudice, not the continent, but the culture. The culture to which we belong is the "Western" culture, with its roots in Western Europe, though now extended to the Americas and Australia.

This culture has gone through four main stages, which Spengler symbolizes by the seasons of the year. It had its "spring" in medieval times, and the features of such a cultural spring are a warrior aristocracy, a priesthood, a peasantry bound to the soil, a limited urban development, anonymous and impersonal art, mainly in the service of the priests and the fighters (churches and castles), and intense spiritual aspiration. It reached its "summer" with the Renaissance, consolidating in city-states, princes surrounded by courtiers, a growing merchant class, and a high development of the arts in which names and personalities become important. Its "autumn" took place in the eighteenth century, when it began to exhaust its inner possibilities, of music in Mozart and Beethoven, of literature in Goethe, of philosophy in Kant. Then it moved into its "winter" phase, which Spengler calls a "civilization" as distinct from a culture. Here its accomplishments in the arts and philosophy are either a further exhaustion of possibilities or an inorganic repetition of what has been done. Its distinctive energies are now technological. It goes in for great engineering feats, for annihilation wars and dictatorships; its population shifts from the countryside into huge amorphous cities which produce a new kind of mass man. The first significant representative of this winter civilization was Napoleon the

world-conqueror; Bismarck and Cecil Rhodes the empire-builder are examples of a type of force-man who will increase through the next centuries.

Before this culture we had the Classical culture, which exemplifies the pattern for us, as it completed its winter phase. Classical culture had its "spring" with the Homeric aristocracy, its "summer" with the Greek city-states, and its "autumn" with Periclean Athens and the Peloponnesian War. Plato and Aristotle, corresponding to Goethe and Kant, exhausted the inner organic possibilities of Classical philosophy, and Alexander the world-conqueror corresponds to Napoleon. The break we express by the phrase "Greek and Roman" is now occurring for us; we are now about where Classical culture was at the time of the Punic Wars, with the world-states of the future fighting it out for supremacy. Of these world-states, only the Prussian tradition that runs through Bismarck seems really to have grasped the facts of the contemporary world, and to have embarked on the "self-determination" which Spengler sees as essential to a state in the winter phase of its culture. Although the theme is very muted in *The Decline of the West*, Spengler seems to have a hope—he regards it as a hope—that Germany may yet become the Rome of the future.

In addition to these two cultures, there is a "Magian" one, which comes in between the Classical and the Western. This culture is Arabian, Syrian, Jewish, Byzantine and eastern Levantine generally: it had its "spring" in the time of Jesus, its Baroque expansion in the age of Mohammed, and it began to exhaust its possibilities in what we should call the later Middle Ages. Spengler also identifies an Egyptian, a Chinese, and an Indian culture, all of which have lasted the same length of time and gone through the same phases. A new culture, Spengler says, is growing up in Russia now, and is still (1918) in its springtime phase. When a new culture, however, grows up within the confines or influence of an older one, it is subject to what Spengler calls a "pseudomorphosis," having its genuine shape twisted and deformed by the prestige of its senior. Thus although the "Magian" culture practically took over the Roman Empire, even eventually shifting its center to Byzantium, still the domination of the Classical culture forced it to express itself in many ways that were alien to it. The same thing is happening in Russia now, where the prestige of an aging culture, as Russia's adoption of Marxism shows, is squeezing the indigenous life out of the younger development.

Such cultures differ profoundly from one another, so profoundly that no mind in a Western culture can really understand what is going on in a Classical or Egyptian or Chinese mind. The differences can only be expressed by some kind of central symbol. The Greek is a purely natural man, in Spengler's sense of the word "nature": he cared nothing for past or future, had no history although he invented it for certain occasions, produced his arts without taking thought for the morrow, and lived in the pure present, the symbol of which for Spengler is the Doric column. Spengler suggests primary symbols for most of the other cultures: the garden for the Chinese, who "wanders" in his world; the straight way for the Egyptian, who was as obsessed by past and future life as the Greek was careless of them; the cavern for Magian culture, expressed architecturally as the mosque—the Pantheon in Rome being,

Spengler says, the first mosque. As Yeats remarks in his *Vision*, taking his cue from Ezra Pound, Spengler probably got his cavern symbol from Frobenius. The new Russian culture is best symbolized as a flat plane: it expresses a "denial of height" in both its architecture and its Communism. The central symbol for the Western, or, as Spengler usually calls it, the "Faustian" culture seems to be that of a center with radiating points. Faustian culture is strongly historical in sense, with a drive into infinite distance that makes it unique among other cultures. The central art of Faustian man is contrapuntal music; Classical culture expressed its sense of the pure present in its sculpture. The approaches of the two cultures even to mathematics are quite different. Classical man thinks of a number as a thing, a magnitude; Western man thinks of it as a relation to other numbers.

This morphological view of history, which sees history as a plurality of cultural developments, is, Spengler claims, an immense improvement on the ordinary "linear" one which divides history into ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Here Spengler seems to me to be on very solid ground, at least to the extent that linear history is really, at bottom, a vulgar and complacent assumption that we represent the inner purpose of all human history. The Hebrews gave us our religion, the Greeks our philosophy, the Romans our law, and these contributions to our welfare descended from the Middle Ages to us. The Chinese and Indians had little to do with producing us; they only produced more Chinese and Indians, so they don't really belong to history. "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay," as the man says in Tennyson. Hegel has been often and most unfairly ridiculed for advocating a view of history which made the Prussian state of his day its supreme achievement. But whenever we adopt this linear view, especially in its progressive form, which asserts that the later we come in time the better we are, we do far worse than Hegel. The linear view of history is intellectually dead, and Spengler has had a by no means ignoble role in assisting at its demise.

Spengler's view of history includes, however, a rather similar distinction between human life with history and human life without it. If we study the history of one of the great cultures, we find that institutions evolve, classes rise, and conquests expand in what seems a logical, but is really an organic, way. But if we try to write a history of Patagonians or Zulus or Mongols, we can produce only a series of events or incidents. These people live and die and reproduce; they trade and think and fight as we do; they make poems and pots and buildings. But their stories are chronicles or annals, not coherent histories. Lapland in the eighteenth century is much like Lapland in the thirteenth: we do not feel, as we feel when we compare eighteenth-century with thirteenth-century England, that it is five centuries *older*. Similarly, after a culture has completely exhausted itself, it passes out of "history." There are, therefore, two forms of human life: a primitive existence with the maximum of continuity and the minimum of change, and life within a growing or declining culture, which is history properly speaking.

A parallel distinction reappears within the cultural developments themselves. People have constantly been fascinated by the degree of accident in history, by the fact that, as Pascal says, history would have been quite different if Cleopatra's nose

had been longer. Spengler distinguishes what he calls destiny from incident. The incidents of a man's life will depend on the job he takes, the woman he marries, the town he decides to live in, and these are often determined by sheer accident. But nothing will alter the fact that it will be his life. Cultures, too, have their real lives as well as the incidents those lives bring to the surface. Spengler does not mention Cleopatra's nose, but he does say that if Mark Antony had won the battle of Actium the shape of Magian culture would have been much easier to recognize. The incidents of Western history would have been quite different if Harold had won at Hastings or Napoleon at the Nile, but the same kind of history would have appeared in other forms. A modern reader would doubtless prefer some other word to "destiny," but the distinction itself is valid, granted Spengler's premises. In what a culture produces, whether it is art, philosophy, military strategy, or political and economic developments, there are no accidents: everything a culture produces is equally a symbol of that culture.

Certain stock responses to Spengler may be set aside at once. In the first place, his view of history is not a cyclical view, even if he does use the names of the four seasons to describe its main phases. A cyclical theory would see a mechanical principle, like the one symbolized by Yeats's double gyre, as controlling the life of organisms, and for Spengler the organism is supreme: there is no superorganic mechanism. Brooks Adams's *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1895), which appears to have wrought such disaster in the impressionable mind of Ezra Pound, does give us a rather crude cyclical theory of history as an alternating series of movements of aggressiveness and usury, with apparently some preference for the former. Yeats's *Vision*, as just implied, is also cyclical, because it is astrological, and therefore sees history as following the mechanical rhythms of nature rather than the organic ones. It seems to me that Spengler's distinction between primitive and historical existence is the real basis of Yeats's distinction between "primary" cultures and the "antithetical" ones that rise out of them, but the spirits who supplied Yeats with his vision did not know much history.

In a way Spengler does give an illusion of a cyclical view: he knows very little about Chinese and Indian civilizations, and relegates the possibility of other such developments in Babylonia or pre-Columbian America to bare mentions. Fair enough: nobody expects omniscience. But this leaves us with a series of five that do run in sequence: the Egyptian, the Classical, the Magian, the Western, and the Russian. This sequence may have its importance, as I shall suggest later, but for Spengler himself cultures grow up irregularly, like dandelions. There was no inevitability that a new Russian culture would appear in the decline of a Western one, nor is there any carryover of contrasting characteristics from one to the other (except in the negative and distorting form of "pseudomorphosis"), such as a genuinely cyclical theory would postulate.

Spengler's analogical method of course rests, not only on the analogies among the cultures themselves, but on a further analogy between a culture and an organism. It is no good saying that a culture is not an organism, and that therefore we can throw out his whole argument. The question whether a culture "is" an

organism or not belongs to what I call the fallacy of the unnecessary essence. It is an insoluble problem, and insoluble problems are insoluble because they have been wrongly formulated. The question is not whether a culture is an organism, but whether it behaves enough like one to be studied on an organic model. "Let the words youth, growth, maturity, decay . . . be taken at last as objective descriptions of organic states," Spengler says. Spengler's massed evidence for these characteristics in a variety of cultures seems to me impressive enough to take seriously. It is no good either denouncing him on the ground that his attitude is "fatalistic" or "pessimistic," and that one ought not to be those things. It is not fatalism to say that one grows older every year; it is not pessimism to say that whatever is alive will eventually die. Or if it is, it doesn't matter.

Again, I am not much worried about the "contradictions" or "ambiguities," which can probably be found by job-lots in Spengler's work. Anybody can find contradictions in any long and complex argument. Most of them are verbal only, and disappear with a little application to the real structure of the argument itself. Most of the rest arise from the fact that the reader's point of view differs from that of the writer, and he is apt to project these differences into the book as inconsistencies within it. There may remain a number of genuine contradictions which really do erode the author's own case, and I think there are some in Spengler. But for a book of the kind he wrote the general principle holds that if one is in broad sympathy with what he is trying to do, no errors or contradictions or exaggerations seem fatal to the general aim; if one is not in sympathy with it, everything, however correct in itself, dissolves into chaos.

Spengler's book is not a work of history; it is a work of historical popularization. It outlines one of the mythical shapes in which history reaches everybody except professional historians. Spengler would not care for the term popularization: he is proud of the length and difficulty of his work, speaks with contempt of the popular; and of his efforts to popularize his own thesis, such as *Prussianism and Socialism* (1919) or *Man and Technics* (1931), the less said the better. Nevertheless, his book is addressed to the world at large, and historians are the last people who should be influenced by it. What Spengler has produced is a vision of history which is very close to being a work of literature—close enough, at least, for me to feel some appropriateness in examining it as a literary critic. If *The Decline of the West* were nothing else, it would still be one of the world's great Romantic poems. There are limits to this, of course: Spengler had no intention of producing a work of *pure* imagination, nor did he do so. A work of literature, as such, cannot be argued about or refuted, and Spengler's book has been constantly and utterly refuted ever since it appeared. But it won't go away, because in sixty years there has been no alternative vision of the data it contemplates.

What seems to me most impressive about Spengler is the fact that everybody does accept his main thesis in practice, whatever they think or say they accept. Everybody thinks in terms of a "Western" culture to which Europeans and Americans belong; everybody thinks of that culture as old, not young; everybody realizes that its most striking parallels are with the Roman period of Classical

culture; everybody realizes that some crucial change in our way of life took place around Napoleon's time. At that I am not counting the people who have a sentimental admiration for medieval culture because it represents our own lost youth, or the people who cannot listen with pleasure to any music later than Mozart or Beethoven, or the people who regard the nineteenth century as a degenerate horror, or the Marxists who talk about the decadence of bourgeois culture, or the alarmists who talk about a return to a new Dark Ages, or the Hellenists who regard Latin literature as a second-hand imitation of Greek literature. All these have a more or less muddled version of Spengler's vision as their basis. The decline, or aging, of the West is as much a part of our mental outlook today as the electron or the dinosaur, and in that sense we are all Spenglerians.

Thus T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, was written without reference to Spengler, an author of whom Eliot would not be likely to take an exalted view. But look at the imagery of the poem:

spring	summer	autumn	winter
morning	noon	evening	night
youth	maturity	age	death
spring rain	river Thames	estuary	sea
Middle Ages	Elizabethans	18th century	20th century

The medieval references, it is true, come mainly through Wagner, and the eighteenth-century section was cut out on the advice of Pound, but the Spenglerian analogy is there in full force. The parallels with Classical culture are also there, even to the explicit allusion to the Punic Wars in the reference to the "ships at Mylae." W. H. Auden's "The Fall of Rome," and much of the imagery of *For the Time Being* are unintelligible without some comprehension, however slight, of Spengler's thesis. Similarly with many poems of Yeats and Pound, where the influence of Spengler is more conscious, especially in Yeats. James Thurber tells us of a man who read somewhere that if one did not acquire sexual knowledge from one's parents one got it out of the gutter, so, having learned nothing from his parents, he undertook an exhaustive analysis of the gutters of several American cities. In other areas we can be more fortunate. If we do not acquire our knowledge of Spengler's vision from Spengler we have to get it out of the air, but get it we will; we have no choice in the matter.

For students of English literature, at least, the most famous attack on Spengler occurs in Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man*, as part of his general onslaught on the "time philosophy." And a most instructive attack it is. In the first place, we notice that Lewis has no alternative philosophy. He makes vague remarks about attaching more importance to space and painting and less to time and music, and says such things as "I am for the physical world." But his book is actually a quite lucid, often brilliant, example of the very procedure he proposes to attack. He shows how twentieth-century philosophy, literature, politics, popular entertainment, music and ballet, and half a dozen other social phenomena all form a single interwoven texture

of "time philosophy," and are all interchangeable symbols of it. We are thus not surprised to find that Lewis's targets of attack are formative influences on his other work, as Joyce influenced his fiction and Bergson his theory of satire. And as *Time and Western Man* is really a Spenglerian book, doing essentially the kind of thing Spengler would do, including taking a hostile and polemical tone toward most contemporary culture, we are not surprised either to find that Lewis seldom comes to grips with Spengler's actual arguments. He does make some effective points, such as showing how a *Zeitgeist* patter can rationalize irresponsible political leadership by explaining that history says it's "time" for another war. But this would apply to a lot of people besides Spengler. What Lewis mainly attacks and ridicules are Spengler's sound effects.

It is true that Spengler's sound effects are sometimes hard to take, and the reason for their existence brings us to a problem that the literary critic is constantly having to face. I have elsewhere tried to show that it is intellectually dishonest to call a man's work reactionary, whatever his personal attitudes may have been, because it is the use made of it by others that will determine whether it will be reactionary or not. The pseudocritic is constantly looking for some feature of a writer's attitude, inside or outside his books, that will enable him to plaster some ready-made label on his author. Genuine criticism is a much more difficult and delicate operation, especially in literature, where a man may be a great poet and still be little better than an idiot in many of his personal attitudes.

In a large number, at least, of important writers we find an imagination which makes them important, and something else, call it an ego, which represents the personality trying to *say* something, to assert and argue and impress. A great deal of criticism revolves around the problem of trying to separate these two elements. We have Eliot the poet and Eliot the snob; Pound the poet and Pound the crank; Yeats the poet and Yeats the poseur; Lawrence the poet and Lawrence the hysteric. Further back, Milton, Pope, Blake, Shelley, Whitman, all present aspects of personality so distasteful to some critics that they cannot really deal critically with their poetry at all. For somebody on the periphery of literature, like Spengler, the task of separation is still more difficult, and requires even more patience. It does a writer no service to pretend that the things which obstruct his imagination are not there, or, if there, can be rationalized or explained away. In my opinion Spengler has a permanent place in twentieth-century thought, but so far as his reputation is concerned, he was often his own worst enemy, and a stupid and confused Spengler is continually getting in the way of the genuine prophet and visionary.

We may suspect, perhaps, some illegitimate motivation in Spengler's writing, some desire to win the war on the intellectual front after being left out of the army. It would be easy to make too much of this, but he does say in the preface to the revised edition that he has produced what he is "proud to call *a German philosophy*" (italics original), although the real thesis of his book is that there are no German philosophies, only Western ones. In any case, he belonged all his life to the far right of the German political spectrum, and carried a load of the dismal *Völkisch* imbecilities that played so important a part in bringing Hitler to power. Hitler in fact

represents something of a nemesis for Spengler the prophet, even though Spengler died in 1936, before Hitler had got really started on his lemming march. Unless he has unusual sources of information, a prophet is well advised to stick to analyzing the present instead of foretelling the future. Spengler wanted and expected a German leader in the Bismarckian and Prussian military tradition, and he doubted whether this screaming *lumpen-Künstler* was it. He greeted the Nazis in a book called in English *The Hour of Decision* (1933), which the Nazis, when they got around to reading it, banned from circulation. But his general political attitude was sufficiently close to Nazism to enable him to die in his bed.

These personal attitudes account for many of the more unattractive elements in his rhetoric, which has all the faults of a prophetic style: harsh, dogmatic, prejudiced, certain that history will do exactly what he says, determined to rub his reader's nose into all the toughness and grimness of his outlook. He has little humor, though plenty of savage and sardonic wit, and a fine gift for gloomy eloquence. He is fond of murky biological language, like calling man a "splendid beast of prey," and much of his imagery is Halloween imagery, full of woo-woo noises and shivery Wagnerian winnies about the "dark" goings-on of nature and destiny. Thus:

With the formed state, high history also lays itself down weary to sleep. Man becomes a plant again, adhering to the soil, dumb and enduring. The timeless village and the "eternal" peasant reappear, begetting children and burying seed in Mother Earth. . . . There, in the souls, world-peace, the peace of God, the bliss of grey-haired monks and hermits, is become actual—and there alone. It has awakened that depth in the endurance of suffering which the historical man in the thousand years of his development has never known. Only with the end of grand History does holy, still Being reappear. It is a drama noble in its aimlessness, noble and aimless as the course of the stars, the rotation of the earth, and alternance of land and sea, of ice and virgin forest upon its face. We may marvel at it or we may lament it—but it is there.

It may not be everybody's poetry, but it is genuine enough of its kind. But occasionally we come across elements connected with this kind of rhetoric that are more objectionable. For example, Spengler knows that his argument really has nothing to do with the conception of "race," and in *The Hour of Decision* he makes it clear—well, fairly clear—that he regards the Nazi attitude to race as suicidal frenzy. But he *cannot* give up the notion that Jews are a separate entity: if he did, one of the most dearly cherished *Völkisch* prejudices would go down the drain:

Spinoza, a Jew and therefore, spiritually, a member of the Magian Culture, could not absorb the Faustian force-concept at all, and it has no place in his system. And it is an astounding proof of the secret power of root-ideas that Heinrich Hertz, the only Jew amongst the great physicists of the recent past, was also the only one of them who tried to resolve the dilemma of mechanics by eliminating the idea of force.

According to Spengler's own thesis, a man who spends his life in seventeenth-century Holland belongs to the Western Baroque, whatever his religious or racial affinities. Most of Spinoza's contemporaries called themselves Christians, which is equally a "Magian" religion according to Spengler. But of course one never knows when such a prejudice will come in handy. "It is something fundamental in the essence of the Magian soul that leads the Jew, as entrepreneur and engineer, to stand

aside from the creation proper of machines and devote himself to the business side of their production." This remark follows closely on a critique of Marx. As the Nazis said, capitalism and communism are both Jewish inventions. The biological function of women is also a fruitful topic for dark symbolization:

Endless Becoming is comprehended in the idea of Motherhood. Woman as Mother *is* Time and *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 also symbols of maternity. *Care* is the root-feeling of future, and all care is motherly.

It is little surprise to learn that Ibsen's Nora "is the very type of the provincial derailed by reading." That is, if Nora had really responded to the *Zeitgeist*, and understood that she *was* Time and Destiny, she would have done nothing so unfeminine as read books, but would have remained illiterate, pregnant, and absorbed in her doll-house.

There is also the unnecessary value judgement implied in the word "decline" itself. Strictly speaking, according to Spengler Western art is not getting any better or worse as it changes from medieval to Renaissance to Baroque conventions; it is simply growing older. But Spengler wants it to decline and exhaust its possibilities, because he wants his contemporaries, at least the German ones, to devote themselves to the things required by their cultural age, which for him are technological, national socialist, and military:

I would sooner have the fine mind-begotten forms of a fast steamer, a steel structure, a precision-lathe, the subtlety and elegance of many chemical and optical processes, than all the pickings and stealings of present-day "arts and crafts," architecture and painting included. I prefer one Roman aqueduct to all Roman temples and statues. . . .

The Romans who built aqueducts and carried out huge massacres and purges also produced Lucretius, Virgil, Ovid, Horace and Catullus. Not one of these names appears in Spengler's indexes (except Horace by courtesy of the translator). He would say, with the Hellenists mentioned above, that Latin poetry was an inorganic repetition of Greek poetry, but it wasn't. But, of course, for him as for others the word "decline" is an easy way of dismissing anything in the contemporary arts that one finds puzzling or disturbing. When Spengler's book was published, the fashionable myth was the myth of progress, and Spengler's evidence that technological advance could just as easily be seen as a hardening of the cultural arteries was useful as a counterweight. But its usefulness, like so many other things in history, has exhausted its possibilities now that this aspect of technology is obvious to everybody.

After all this has been said, and a great deal more that could be said taken for granted, it is still true that very few books, in my experience, have anything like Spengler's power to expand and exhilarate the mind. The boldness of his leaping imagination, the kaleidoscopic patterns that facts make when he throws them together, the sense of the whole of human thought and culture spread out in front of one, the feeling that the blinkers of time and space have been removed from one's inward

eyes when Greek sculptors are treated as the “contemporaries” of Western composers, all make up an experience not easily duplicated. I first encountered him as an undergraduate, and I think this is the best time to read him, because his perspective is long range and presbyopic, and his specific judgments all too often wrong headed. Some of his comparative passages, such as his juxtaposing of colors in Western painting with tonal effects in Western music, read almost like free association. Any number of critics could call these comparisons absurd or mystical balderdash. But Spengler has the power to challenge the reader’s imagination, as critics of that type usually have not, and he will probably survive them all even if all of them are right.

The best-known philosophy of history after Spengler, at least in English, is that of Arnold Toynbee, whose *Study of History* began appearing while Spengler was still alive. Toynbee has twenty-one cultures to Spengler’s seven or eight, and twenty of them follow, more or less, Spengler’s organic scheme of youth, maturity, decline (accompanied by a “time of troubles”) and dissolution. But the twenty-first is Toynbee’s own Western culture, and that one has just got to be different: to assume that it will go the way of the others would be “fatalism,” which is what he professes to object to in Spengler. So he develops a “challenge and response” theory which enables him to use a mechanical metaphor instead of an organic one at the stage corresponding to “decline,” and talk of “breakdown” instead. But the sequence of genesis, growth, breakdown and disintegration in Toynbee seems more jumbled than Spengler’s consistently organic model. He begins his discussion of the causes of “breakdown,” at the beginning of Volume Four, with a critique of Spengler which has all the air of a dodged issue. He says that it is too early to say whether Western culture has come to its “time of troubles” yet, which is quite a statement to make in 1939; he says Spengler is a “fatalist,” which as we have seen is irrelevant, and he says that Spengler treats a metaphor as though it were a fact. But every historical overview of this kind, including Toynbee’s, is and has to be metaphorical. When we look at Toynbee’s own table of contents we find “nemesis of creativity,” “schism and palingenesis,” “withdrawal and return,” and if those are not metaphors I don’t know the meaning of the word. He also seems to feel that ignoring Spengler’s distinction between destiny and incident will give more sense of freedom to man by putting more emphasis on the accidental factors of history. There is of course a great deal that is of value and interest in Toynbee’s books, but as a Spenglerian revisionist he seems to me to be something of a bust. Except for one thing.

That one thing is his account of the passing of Classical into Western culture. He says that when a culture dies it forms an internal and an external proletariat. The late Roman Empire had its internal proletariat in the bread-and-circus mobs of Rome and the other big cities, and its external proletariat in the Goths and Vandals breaking through the periphery of the Empire. Out of these two forms of proletariat there emerged a “Universal Church,” which acted as the tomb of the old culture and the womb of the new one. Spengler also speaks of a “second religiousness” which enters a culture in its final stages: it seems to be one of his most useful and suggestive ideas. But he thinks of Toynbee’s internal proletariat simply as a rabble: “The mass is the end, the radical nullity,” he says. He overlooks both the connection of primitive

Christianity with the proletariat and its extraordinary power of organization. It seems to me that Toynbee gives a more rational explanation of the historical role of Christianity in this period than Spengler gives. He ignores Spengler's "Magian" intermediate culture, but his own view does not necessarily do away with it: it merely points to something else that was also happening, to different aspects of what was happening, and to a process which would also account for the "cavern" imagery that Spengler associates with Byzantine culture. It also provides a means of explaining something very important that Spengler leaves out.

This is the curious fascination of Western culture with the idea of making itself into a reborn Classical culture. In its "spring" period its poets devoted great energies to recreating the visions of Virgil and Ovid; in its political life, it revolved around the conception of a reborn Augustus, a Christianized Roman Emperor. Why is the central mythical figure of English literature King Arthur, who has so vague and hazy a historical existence? At best he was merely a local British leader making a temporary rally against the Saxons, who of course won in the end. Why not make more of, say, Alfred, who really was a great man, and whose historical existence is not open to doubt? When we read in Geoffrey of Monmouth that Arthur conquered the armies of Rome, and remember that his colleague in romance was Charlemagne, we get a clue: he is a prototype of the reborn Christian Caesar, the Holy Roman Emperor. This symbolism of recreating Classical culture reaches its climax with the Renaissance, a word which means the "rebirth" of Classicism. It is highly significant that Spengler is rather silly about the Renaissance, which he treats as an un-German interruption of the development of German Gothic into German Baroque. He also seems unaware of the extent to which the same idea dominated, to or past the verge of obsession, a long series of German writers, from Winckelmann through Hölderlin to Nietzsche and George, the last two of whom Spengler certainly knew well. Of course Toynbee's death and rebirth pattern does introduce a more cyclical element into history than Spengler admits. Vico is often regarded as a precursor of Spengler, though I see no evidence that Spengler had read him, but Toynbee brings us much closer to what Vico means by the *ricorso* than anything in Spengler.

If one culture can recreate another one in this way, we have to abandon what seems to me in any case a profoundly unacceptable element in Spengler's argument: his insistence that every culture is a windowless monad, and cannot be genuinely influenced by another culture. "To the true Russian the basic proposition of Darwinism is as devoid of meaning as that of Copernicus is to a true Arab." This remark may be a curious anticipation of the Lysenko business in Stalinist Russia, but on the whole such observations are clearly nonsense: there are a lot of Arabs who know that the earth goes round the sun, and they are not bogus ones. In fact science, in general, is the great obstacle to Spengler's cultural solipsism. Granted that different cultures will construct different scientific world-pictures, there is an obviously translatable quality in science, which makes its principles quite as comprehensible to Chinese or Indians as to Germans or Americans. Such science might even develop a world view on a supercultural scale. We notice that Spengler casts some uneasy glances at what he calls "the ruthlessly cynical hypothesis of the Relativity theory." He tries to see it, of course, as "exhausting the possibilities" of

Western science, but he seems to be not quite sure that its view of time will be content to confine itself to the world of measurement and stay out of his dark existential territory.

Apart from this, however, perhaps the fact that Western culture has spread over the world means something more than simply the capacity for expansion which Spengler assigns to the Faustian spirit. If science is a universal structure of knowledge, it can help mankind to break out of culture-group barriers. Spengler of course thinks this is a pipe dream, and insists that the people of Asia and Africa have no interest in Western science or technology except as a means of destroying the West. But Marx is a far more effective prophet in the world today than Spengler, and the reason is that he emphasizes something uniform and global in the human situation. The factors which are the same throughout the world, such as the exploitation of labor, have always been, if not less important, at any rate less powerful in history than conflicts of civilizations. Now they are more important, and growing in power. The industrial revolution brings a new factor into the situation which cannot be wholly absorbed into a dialectic of separate "cultures," important as those have been. The question whether Western civilization will survive, decline or break down is out of date, for the world is trying to outgrow the conception of "a" civilization, and reach a different kind of perspective.

If the death-to-rebirth transition from Classical to Western culture happened once, something similar could happen again in our day, though the transition would be to something bigger than another culture. This would imply three major periods of human existence: the period of primitive societies, the period of the organic cultures, and a third period now beginning. Spengler, we saw, attacks and ridicules the three-period view of ancient, medieval and modern ages with, we said, a good deal of justification. But he also remarks that the notion of three ages has had a profound appeal to the Faustian consciousness, from Joachim of Floris in the thirteenth century onward. It is possible that what is now beginning to take shape is the real "Third Reich," of which the Nazis produced so hideous a parody.

The detail of Spengler's vision is all around us, in the restless wandering of great masses of people, in the violence and overcrowding of our almost unmanageable cities, in the strong ethical sense in some social areas, which Spengler compares with Buddhism in India and Stoicism in Rome, neutralized by dictatorships and police states in others, in the "second religiousness" of Oriental cults and the like, in the brutality and vacuousness of our standard forms of entertainment, in the physical self-indulgence paralleling the Roman cult of the bath, in the rapid series of vogues and fashions in the arts which distract us from their inner emptiness. It would be disastrous to pretend that these are not features of cultural aging. It would be still more disastrous to underestimate the powerful inertia in society that wants to "decline" still further, give up the freedom that demands responsibility, and drop out of history. What Spengler said would happen is happening, to a very considerable degree. But while Spengler is one of our genuine prophets, he is not our definitive prophet: other things are also happening, in areas that still invite our energies and loyalties and are not marked off with the words "too late."