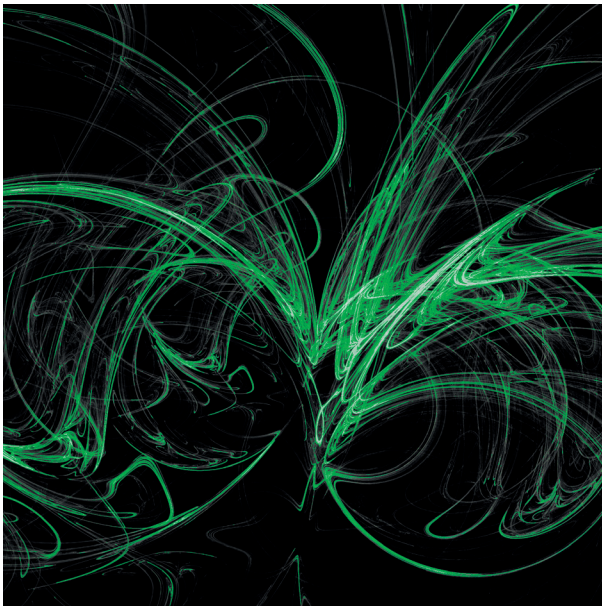Jerzy Jedlicki

A Degenerate World

Jerzy Jedlicki

A Degenerate World

Modernism and pessimism seem to go hand in hand. What are the sources of the historical pessimism we see in the legions of writers and thinkers over the past three centuries who saw modern civilization as degenerate and despicable, happily marching to its own doom? Why did so many educated and intelligent people despise the innovations that were the work of their contemporaries? This book focuses on English and Polish thought during the 19th and early 20th centuries, a time of relative political stability and great success in science and industry, when many nevertheless voiced concern that Europe is moving in the wrong direction, to its own destruction. After WWI, these warnings became even more dire and have left their mark on the European culture of our times.

The Author
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A Degenerate World

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Gustave Flaubert[1]

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1   Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet. A Tragi-comic novel of Bourgeois Life*, transl. by Mark Polizzotti, First Dalkey Archive ed., 2005, p. 277.

Introduction

Ever since I wrote *A Suburb of Europe* (*Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują*) in the 1980s, I have been intrigued by the question of why so many educated and intelligent people would have such a low regard for the innovations that were the work of their contemporaries or even themselves. Or conversely, why on earth would people create such a civilisation in which they feel so bad. One could respond that some people are the builders and makers, while others are simply unhappy and disgusted by nature, and that malcontent and misanthropy are fairly common characteristics among intellectuals, who also happen to be the main source of fare for a historian of thought. That answer doesn't quite satisfy me. There are plenty of intellectuals who have an optimistic view of progress in its various forms. Secondly, in the texts of these angry or bitter accusers of modernity, whether we agree with them or not, one can find many acute and prescient judgements which demand that the historian pay closer attention.

I had intended to follow up my earlier book with a continuation encompassing the years 1890–1914, looking into the Polish intelligentsia's attitudes towards the modernist crisis in European culture. This endeavour would require me to differentiate what was purely Polish from what were merely adoptions of Western intellectual positions towards the innovations in technology, customs, philosophy, and the arts.

The Polish disputes regarding modernity are coloured by Poland's geographical and political position in Europe relative to the main centres of European culture, as well as by the axiom of the defence of native culture. In Poland and similarly situated countries of Europe (politically, economically, and culturally), one finds that the criticisms of modernity are shaped by attitudes towards what is foreign or alien, as well as by attitudes towards the West in general and towards its cities. Hoping to eliminate these factors, for the sake of comparison, it seemed only fitting to look into how the issue was portrayed in the main centres of Europe. This explains my interest in England, unquestionably the most advanced country in Europe during the 19th century.

Entering these new grounds, I had to tread slowly and carefully. The amount and richness of sources and writings on the topic in the English, as well as in the French and American sources, was impressive, if not staggering, and it soon became obvious that there were several trends in the criticisms of the emerging industrial civilisation, starting at least with the English Romanticists. For every work I read, five new index cards would appear in my bibliographical catalogue.

Clearly, this was getting a bit out of hand. What had been intended to be a comparative excursion of one or two chapters had become the main body of the work.

The reader will find some of the author's comparative intentions in two earlier written texts which I have included: "Gloomy Stereotypes of the West" and "City on Trial" (Chapters 2 and 3). Both of these chapters saw their beginnings in papers at academic conferences.

In 1994–1995, for a joint gathering of humanists and scientists in Jabłonna under the auspices of the Polish Academy of Sciences on the topic of "The Dilemmas of Modern Civilization and Human Nature," I ventured to write a comprehensive, yet concise, text entitled "The Historical Pedigree of the Idea of a Crisis in European Civilisation." It was published in a collection of materials from that gathering (Janusz Reykowski and Tadeusz Bielicki, eds.), as well as in the Polish periodical *Znak* under the title – "Three Centuries of Desperation" (1996, no. 1). As the scope of this text is somewhat broader and serves as an outline of the topic, I have included "Three Centuries of Desperation" (with some minor additions) as an introductory, first chapter to this book, although it neither exhausts the topic nor leads to definitive conclusions. The original text sparked lively debates in Jabłonna, at a meeting at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and in the periodical *Znak*, raising some interesting issues which I have included as a *Postscript* to the chapter.

The historical manifestations of the idea of a crisis of civilisation in post-Enlightenment Europe are so many and diverse that bringing them together would be an enterprise beyond the capabilities of a single author. In the literature known to me, I have found only one serious work of this sort, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, by the American historian Arthur Herman. While I hold this work in high esteem, it is obvious that in a work of such scope choices must be made, and this work had little information on the catastrophists of Victorian and Edwardian England, to whom the fourth chapter of this book is dedicated. "Degeneration, the English Way" appeared for the first time in the Polish edition of this book.

While German philosophy – from Schopenhauer to Heidegger – was certainly a rich source of civilisational pessimism, I lack the linguistic and scholarly competencies, and perhaps, the enthusiasm, necessary to tackle the topic. While I take heart that much has been written and translated here in Poland on the topic, the same cannot be said of the perhaps less profound, but not at all less critical English writings on modern civilisation. That is one of the reasons the chapter on

English "degeneration" takes a more panoramic approach, rather than focusing on individual authors.

The choice of authors and texts is without doubt subjective – how could it be otherwise? I have tried to base my choices on their influence and popularity during their own times, as that would provide a more accurate picture of the mental and emotional climate of the era. It was of less interest to me that the 20th century would see the entire deck reshuffled with some of these earlier authors relegated to oblivion even in their own countries, their names known only to historians. Presenting their opinions on the era and Europe's future, at least in abbreviated form, I have tried to keep our knowledge of what was to come in the next century out of the picture – or at least not to let it intrude too conspicuously. The reader knows for him or herself what some of the ideological concepts were to lead to in the not too distant future.

There is one thing of which I am certain and feel compelled to include in this introduction – that, namely, the division of historical optimists and pessimists, so amusingly and equally ridiculed in the excerpts about the two heroes from Flaubert's satire, does not separate the wheat from the chaff, whatever might be represented as the "wheat." There were some thinkers amongst both groups who rejected any and all arguments that might weaken their belief, be it in global progress or catastrophe. Ideas that would prove dangerous to humanity stemmed from both sides of the debate. Yet both sides, albeit rather in their moderate than extreme variants, offered insightful and ethically mature diagnoses of their times and made predictions that were not entirely misguided.

Has this subject essentially changed? A little more than a century has passed since the times described in this book, and it has been a century that was immensely replete with events and catastrophes. The civilisational landscape of Europe today is completely different than it was in 1914. Yet, when one reads contemporary opinions about modernity, it is easy to get the impression that this is but a continuation of the dispute, with similar arguments colliding with one another. Neither side relents, neither in their accusations nor in their defence, and sometimes both are even expressed in the writings of the same author. This civilisation of ours is ambivalent by nature. It is unsurpassed in its creditable progress in knowledge and discovery and for the development of technological and economical might but pitifully helpless in its efforts to contain the aggressive inclinations of its inhabitants and to alleviate the abject human misery and despair so prevalent on this planet.

I would like to thank all those who took part in the many discussions during the preparation of this book, especially those regarding the essay "Three

Centuries of Desperation." Among them, I would first like to mention the late professors Stefan Amsterdamski and Barbara Skarga. Thanks are due also to Tadeusz Bielicki, Ewa Bieńkowska, Maciej Janowski, Daniel Grinberg, and Janusz Reykowski for their comments and, especially, their criticisms.

March, 2016

Chapter 1. Three Centuries of Desperation: The Origins of the Idea of a Crisis of European Civilisation

La crise de l'esprit, La crise de l'Occident, The Crisis of Our Age, Crise de civilisation, A Crisis of Values, Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur, Die Krisis der europäischen Menschentums und die Philosophie, Kryzys i filozofia (Crisis and Philosophy), *Kryzys myślenia* (The Crisis of Thought), *Kryzys nowoczesności a świat przeżywany* (The Crisis of Modernity and the World as Experienced), *Kritik und Krise: Ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt, Freud and the Crisis of our Culture, Thomas Mann und die Krise der bürgerlichen Kultur, Robert Musil and the Crisis of European Culture, Intelektualiści a kryzys* (Intellectuals and Crisis), *Kryzys świadomości europejskiej w eseistyce polskiej* (A Crisis of the European Consciousness as Reflected in Polish Essays)

This is but a handful of titles from my bibliographical box. But even stronger words are used in other such titles – just to quote a sample:

The Decay of Capitalistic Civilization, Der Untergang des Abendlandes, Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej, Déclin de l'Europe, Koniec Europy (The End of Europe), *Konets nashego vremeni* (The End of our Times), *L'Europe et le mythe du decline, Decadence in the Modern World, The End of the Modern World, Degeneration: the Dark Side of Progress, Cywilizacja na ławie oskarżonych* (Civilisation in the Dock), *The Revolt against Civilization, The Apocalypse of History, Apocalypse 2000: Economic Breakdown and the Suicide of Democracy.*

Enough of the litany for now, though I assure you, I could go on like this for quite some time longer.

The list includes works diverse as to genre: speculative and analytical, philosophical and historical, all written and published in the course of the twentieth century with their number growing exponentially in recent years. I doubt whether there is any other notion that appears as often in the titles of treatises, sections, or chapters as "crisis" (and its synonymous variations) does. As one might guess by the examples I have quoted, I am seeking the ways this word and concept are used when referring *en globe* to the status or condition of our civilisation or to European culture taken in its entirety. I consequently ignore, for my present purpose, works dealing with crises being transitory by nature or limited to a single, even if extremely important, field or area – such as economic and political downturns or breakthroughs, or the so-called crises in the arts.

It could be demonstrated without much effort that the notion of "crisis" is terribly overused nowadays, thus losing its clear semantic contours.[2] One might admit that the idea has been trivialised, its content hollowed out. One can joke around a little about the familiar mannerism of complaining about the times and the world's overall decay, lamenting that humanity is going to the dogs and morality is collapsing. All this is possible, but this is not how one should address the problem. The point is that among the diagnosticians of civilisational crisis are thinkers of the stature of Husserl, Valéry, Berdyaev, Jaspers, Arendt, and a number of others – along with a whole legion of serious historians of ideas and culture, not to mention poets or essayists. It would be unimaginable to neglect their intuitions and insights, even if their arguments might at times seem to us not quite clear or convincing.

"The lament seems all-pervading," Leszek Kołakowski tells us,

> Whatever area of life we reflect upon, our natural instinct is to ask, What is wrong with it? And indeed we keep asking, What is wrong with God? With democracy? With social-ism? With art? With sex? With the family? With economic growth? It seems as though we live with the feeling of an all-encompassing crisis without being able, however, to identify its causes clearly, unless we escape into easy, one-word pseudosolutions ("capi-talism," "God has been forgotten," etc.). The optimists often become very popular and are listened to avidly, but they are met with derision in intellectual circles; we prefer to be gloomy.[3]

I would like to look for the sources of this sombre mood and identify the reasons for its philosophical infectiousness. Let us note that it is not in some poor and backward countries that this historical pessimism emerges, but rather here, in Europe, where scientific knowledge has continuously proliferated over recent centuries, technology and medicine have developed, the arts flourished, and where – in spite of wars, persecutions, and regions of poverty – the population has grown, as has its welfare and comfort. We have witnessed a growing humanitarianism in the law and improvements in safety, security, and hygiene, all resulting in an increasing life expectancy. This paradox seems to be worthy of consideration.

It is, therefore, not the crisis in itself, or to be more cautious, the so-called crisis of modernity, that may concern or bother a historian of ideas, but rather, the *debate* on crisis that has been going on for generations. It is worth noting, though,

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2   Cf. Krzysztof Michalski (ed.), *O kryzysie. Rozmowy z Castel Gandolfo*, Warsaw: Res Publica, 1985, p. 160, and passim.

3   Cf. Leszek Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 11–12.

that in this subject matter it is extremely difficult to separate the objective status of the world from its subjective qualifications. The latter, albeit usually making references to some material or actual observations, are usually loaded with moral appraisals or intuitions, and above all, are too general to be convincingly proven, or disproved. Still, these qualifications tend to develop a life of their own, becoming ideas in themselves, and take root in our image of the world, making it impossible to tear them out. Economists who see public convictions regarding economic crises as a factor contributing to them are well aware of this.

Consequently, it follows that the only sensible definition of a crisis of civilisation is the postulate that it is what is seen in the eyes of its beholder. The history of those perceptions, visions, and discourses form an extremely vast subject of research, one that a historian finds impressive and whose contours I would like to describe in an initial outline.

A Sick Civilisation: Since When?

Various replies are given to this question.

There is, for instance, a conviction that the real spiritual crisis, the total emptiness and sterility of existence, has only been the fate of modern generations – of the conformist society of mass consumption seen in the most highly developed countries. The accumulating symptoms of the spiritual decline of the West, such as the decline of things sacred, the extinguishing of the modernistic drive in culture, the relativisation of all norms and canons, were diagnosed more often than not in the seventh and eighth decades of the twentieth century.[4] Cornelius Castoriadis, the French philosopher, gives a somewhat earlier date: as it turns out, the Western world had already entered a crisis "around the year 1950."[5] Many a historian is obviously of the opinion that it was rather the Second World War, particularly with its methodical annihilation of the Jews, that conclusively defiled European civilisation and brought a lasting shame upon it.

However, it behooves us to recall that diagnoses of a crisis of civilisation were abundant in the twenties and thirties of the last century, with World War One marking the crucial moment in the history of mankind. It was then that the line of ascending development broke; the consequences of metropolitan, industrial, and bureaucratic centralisation were revealed and rampant imperialism gave

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4   Cf. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 120–145.

5   Cornelius Castoriadis, "Kryzys Zachodu", trans. Hanna Morawska, *Krytyka*, 39 (1992), p. 142.

birth to uncontrollable revolution, whereas the old European culture became but a thin veneer of refinement covering the invariably barbaric nature of humanity.[6]

Yet, there are many authors believing that the genuine, though perhaps not as spectacular, critical moment was the close of the century, when the nineteenth-century cognitive optimism and belief in the moral progress of mankind were, supposedly, dying out. In parallel, the modernist breakthrough in European philosophy and the arts brought about a mood of decadence, Nietzschean nihilism, contempt for the principles of bourgeois decency – in a word, everything that the catastrophic imagination of the bohemians and the artistic avant-gardes fed upon, and which heralded the end of the safe and more or less rationally ordered universe.[7]

However, the image of the incessant creative expansion of the preceding nineteenth century, which only began to lose self-confidence in the century's last decades, didn't prove convincing to everybody. For instance, Oswald Spengler observed that the commercialised culture of cosmopolitan urban metropolises, together with their inherent imperial expansionism, was already characteristic of a fossilised, purely brain-oriented, civilisation in decline. The spiritual greatness of Europe ended with Napoleon and Goethe.[8]

If not earlier than that. Is it not the case that the philosophy, ideology, and methodology of the Enlightenment – having furnished the human mind with an almost limitless power over matter and having driven a Faustian psyche into man's heart – are most frequently accused of undermining the sphere of the sacred and deriding the concepts of an invisible universe, thus laying the nucleus of the ill-fated disunion of European spirituality that has not ceased to plague us until now? The point is, the dilemma of the crisis of modern civilisation usually

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6   E.g. Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy, London: Sheed and Ward, 1957, pp. 213 ff.; Florian Znaniecki, *Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej. Szkic z pogranicza filozofii kultury i socjologii*, Poznan: Gebethner i Wolff, 1921, pp. 975, 1107, and passim.

7   George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1961, pp. 220–280.

8   Introduction to: Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, *Form and Actuality*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1922, pp. 33–37; Henry Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler: a Critical Estimate*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962, pp. 83–84.

unfolds within the confines of the more than two hundred years of dispute around the value of the rationalistic heritage of the eighteenth century.[9]

Yet, for those who are willing to seek the origins of the crisis and the disenchantment of the world in the rationalist approach of the scientific method, it is recommendable to look even further back – to Descartes and Galileo, at least.[10] Some would delve even deeper into the past. Marian Zdziechowski approvingly cited Gustave Le Bon's idea whereby it has been since the times of the Renaissance that "modern man, like a ship with its rudder knocked off […] is wandering around the spaces once populated by his gods, who have now been expelled by science." He went on drawing a straight line of spiritual heritage from humanism to bolshevism.[11] Nikolai Berdyaev, author of *The New Middle Ages*, was close in this respect. Today, this view is radicalised even further by Krzysztof Dorosz, a Christian critic of culture, who identifies spiritual venom in mediaeval scholasticism – particularly in the dispute between nominalism and realism: "In the dispute, a worldliness-centred anti-metaphysical stance which is more at home with observation and experiment in the material world than with spiritual contemplation of the essence of things emerged the victor. Having established discursive reason as the instrument that controls the world, nominalism has relegated faith to the sphere of the subjective […] In this way, the eternal conflict between cognition and faith has deepened dramatically."[12]

Or, perhaps, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker is right when he says that in the history of highly developed culture he can identify no moment or process that would act as the original sin that eventually led to the great crisis of our epoch – "its reason has been there ever since the beginning." Which, if my understanding is correct, is to say that European civilisation was conceived with some innate flaw, since "Christians became the lords of an unconverted world" and have been tackling their responsibility for grand social structures none too well ever since.[13]

But one could delve even deeper. Together with Heidegger, one might presume that it is from the time of Socrates and the sophists onwards that philosophy has

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9   Cf. e.g. Czesław Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, trans. Louis Iribarne, New York: Farrar – Straus – Giroux, 2000, 48–49 and others.

10 Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, p. 8.

11 Marian Zdziechowski, *Wybór pism*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1993, pp. 241, 255, 450.

12 Krzysztof Dorosz, *Maski Prometeusza: eseje konserwatywne*, London: Aneks, 1989, pp. 134–135. Similarily in Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Expanded edition), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 2–7.

13 Michalski (ed.), *O kryzysie …*, p. 173.

gone astray from "listening attentively to Being and its divine nature," for which we have never ceased paying a price.[14] Or, sharing Horkheimer and Adorno's view, one might come to the conclusion that the internal antinomies of the incompletely rationalised "Enlightenment," which in the twentieth century are degrading and tearing our civilisation apart, were already prefigured in the *Odyssey*. Thus, those who want to contemplatively comprehend the reasons behind the catastrophe that the "wholly enlightened earth" confronted in the years of triumphant totalitarianism have to reach as far back as "to the beginning of recorded history."[15]

It therefore becomes clear that the way we comprehend the nature of the diseases gnawing at the vitals of our contemporary world determines how far back in history one would seek for their causes. Nearly every combination of time periods is possible for this purpose.

A Depraved Animal

A completely different matter is an attempt to capture the beginning of the crisis discourse – namely, the moment a philosopher for the first time recognised his period as fraught with conflict that may (or must) turn against man and his calling. We can ignore, for the present purpose, the ancient or mediaeval prophecies of apocalyptic disasters which were believed to precede the coming of Judgment Day and the establishment of Christ's Kingdom on the earth, as well as their modern counterparts. In order, though, for one to be able to speak of a historical continuity of the issue of crisis, a concept had first to emerge of the history of the civilised world as a directed process, one that would be paving its way through a disorderly brushwood of events and occurrences. The course and the conclusion of such a process, should it ever come to an end at all, would not be conditional upon the will of the Most High, but rather, directly upon human actions.

The discovery that the progress of thought as well as that of socialisation could be arranged into a certain cumulative developmental sequence was, no doubt, critical. Conditional upon the given author's axiology and historical imagination,

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14 Andrzej Niemczuk, "Filozoficzna świadomość kryzysu kultury (XIX–XX w.)", in Zdzisław J. Czarnecki (ed.), *W kręgu pesymizmu historycznego: studia nad nowożytnymi filozofiami historii,* Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie, 1992, p. 99.

15 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 1, 36.

the current and foreseeable direction of these transformations could be perceived as auspicious or perilous, if not calamitous, for mankind. Incidentally, concern about the wrong direction of development pursued by the world appears to be as old as the very concept of development. In Western culture, the idea of degeneration has been the inseparable reverse side of the notion of progress – both being offspring of the eighteenth century. The philosophy of the time was not as homogeneous as it is commonly believed: the Enlightenment was in fact multifaceted, and not all of its faces were serene and confident. True, it was an age when European intellectual elites became aware of the irresistible cognitive power of the human mind, personified as it was by scientists and thinkers of genius. Hence, we have the hope that with time a reasonable solution would be found for any cognitive, social, political, or moral problem, while humankind would be working its way up through stages of ever-greater perfection as knowledge and education progress. No-one denied the growth of empirical or theoretical knowledge, but sceptical attitudes with respect to their beneficial effects reappeared time after time. The memory of the downfalls of Hellas and Rome weighed heavily like a *memento mori* over Enlightenment civilisation. If civilisations are mortal, how can one be certain that a similar adventure would not happen once again? Whilst it was not quite clear where the barbarians would come from this time, perhaps no such barbarians from the outside were needed at all? A civilisation, having developed into its highest form of sophistication, might tend, perhaps, to implode on its own. For the spirit of a civilisation grows lazy, its valour weakens, the fear of God and His Commandments fades amidst the conveniences of life; scepticism and individualism proliferate, social bonds fall apart, the elites of birth and property give way to the pressures of commonalty; times of anarchy, confusion, and corruption approach.

> Society falls to pieces; frightful wars, both internecine and with foreign foes, destroy its members, civilization collapses, men scatter, cities fall; over their ruins forests rise again. Thereby one cycle completes itself, and a new one begins.

This is how (in Isaiah Berlin's summary[16]) Giambattista Vico envisaged the declining phase that he believed each civilisation would have to undergo. Thus, enlightened Europe would also reach its climax sooner or later, which would be followed by the inevitable fall. The Neapolitan thinker's description became prototypal for thousands of later diagnoses of repletion and decadence – a

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16 Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas,* London: Chatto and Windus, 1980, pp. 62–63.

decadence that is not necessarily self-caused but always inherent in the self-acting mechanism of human history.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau invested much greater moral passion in his own vision. In his famous treatises, civilisation (*avant-la-lettre*) is disclosed as a source of suffering and disruption. With the emergence of society, humans have gained property but lost freedom; they have yielded themselves to laws but lost their inherent capacity for compassion. Man has gained the knowledge of good and evil and has taken advantage of it to do harm to his fellow men. Foremost, however, he has lost his authenticity: "[…] constantly beside himself, [he] knows only how to live in the Opinion of others; insomuch that it is, if I may say so, merely from their Judgement that he derives the Consciousness of his own Existence." Civilisation (embodied in the Paris *beau monde* of Louis XV's time) is a grand edifice of appearances, hypocrisy, prepossessing forms, rituals, and artificial needs. The accusation was total and embraced everything that in the time of the Encyclopaedists was associated with the idea of progress.

> When on the one hand we consider the immense Labours of Mankind, so many Sciences brought to Perfection, so many Arts invented, so many Powers employed, so many Abysses filled up, so many Mountains levelled, so many Rocks rent to Pieces, so many Rivers made navigable, so many Tracts of Land cleared, Lakes emptied, Marshes drained, enormous Buildings raised upon the Earth, and the Sea covered with Ships and Sailors; and on the other weigh with ever so little Attention the real Advantages that have resulted from all these Works to the Human Species, we cannot help being amazed at the vast Disproportion observable between these Things, and deplore the Blindness of Man, which, to feed his foolish Pride, and I don't know what vain Self-Admiration, makes him eagerly court and pursue all the Miseries he is capable of feeling, and which beneficent Nature had taken Care to keep at a Distance from him.[17]

Such a ruthless judgment passed on the entire ongoing course of history and the processes of knowledge and civilisation seemed outrageously unjust and provoked objection. However, the fanatically extreme mind of the philosopher, who did not hesitate to draw the ultimate consequences from his assumptions, has contributed in an unusual way to the exercise of the analysis of the idea of civilisation – this apparently, and intentionally, unexplored territory. The idea was just beginning to be formed in the mid-eighteenth century, and Rousseau

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17   John James [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau, *Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*, London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761, pp. 180, 204–205.

had already exposed its internal rupture: "[…] our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and sciences have improved."[18]

Most illnesses have likewise been caused by civilisation and excessive learning: "I dare almost affirm that a State of Reflection is a State against Nature, and that the Man who meditates is a depraved Animal."[19] The philosopher seeks his ideal in evangelical simplicity, in the faith and love of a sincere, unlearned heart. All the evil of heresies, schisms, wars, and religious persecutions is, after all, rooted in scholasticism, in the haughtiness of those clergymen who wanted to contain Christ's teachings in their syllogisms. Hence, as a consequence of the enlightened age, all have become theologians but ceased being Christians.

The development of human mental powers thus turns out to have meant a voluntary departure from the paradise of innocence and a descent into the hell of civilisation. These early dissertations of Jean-Jacques represent, one could say, a prototype for the many subsequent revolts of intellectuals against intellectualism, of sophisticated minds against the sophistication of culture – a culture that is capable of producing works so great, whilst proving completely unable to restrain the brutality of human world. And that is not all – as this culture serves tyranny and violence by providing them the instruments of bondage.[20]

In Rousseau's concept, social progress is therefore ambivalent, dissociated; it simultaneously gives birth to good and evil. It is evil that prevails at the end of the day – and human history backfires on human nature. "The physical, social, and moral evil that is devouring man persists not only because it has not yet been removed, but it attests to the fact that man has himself produced it, in spite of his own natural inclinations." We are entangled in the history we are creating, leading to our own species' perdition and misfortune.[21]

This bitter knowledge will never be revoked. Even if in the eighteenth century the intellectual life of the European elites yielded to the mostly alluring idea of the gradual improvement of human societies in the best of all possible worlds, doubt and protest have anyways resisted expulsion from minds and writings. In its initial phase, the French Revolution seemed to confirm the enthusiasts' beliefs,

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18 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences", in *Rousseau's Social Contract, etc.*, trans. G.D.H. Cole, Everyman's Library ed. Ernest Rhys, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1913, p. 133.

19 Rousseau, *Discourse upon the Origin …*, p. 27.

20 Cf. Jerzy Jedlicki, *A Suburb of Europe. Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilization*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999, pp. 104–107.

21 Bronisław Baczko, *Solitude et communauté*, trans. Claire Brendhel-Lamhout, Paris: Mouton, pp. 102, 132–133.

but the philosophical mood of Europe soon changed as the movement's excesses progressed – to the extent that Condorcet's miserable death in gaol, just after completing his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, takes on symbolic relevance.

The Plagues of Philosophy and Algebra

All the same, revolutionary crisis was definable in a variety of ways. Like Edmund Burke, one could see in it the victory of miserable and primitive barbarians over the old, chivalrous Christian civilisation that safeguarded religion, honour, and tradition, whilst also cherishing the sciences and handicrafts.[22] One could, like William Blake, drill even deeper and blame not the barbarians but the horror of a modern science that has pulled Earth and Man down from their exalted place in the Universe and, with complete moral indifference, presents a dead world as a system of mathematic equations. Blake, a "poet of fury," as Ciesław Miłosz calls him, is definitely extreme in how he perceived the world after Bacon, Locke, and Newton as a landscape of spiritual devastation and deadness.[23] His conviction that the systems of mechanics and other contemporary sciences, which lay claim to wield power also over the domain of morality, leave no room for faith, poetic imagination, metaphysics, and emotions soon became a part of the popular opinion, later to be thoroughly hackneyed by the time of the romanticists. That enmity or, in the best case, unfriendly separation, between the universe of the arts and humanities and that of science and technology has in fact been the case since the late years of the eighteenth century; the two worlds could no longer understand their respective languages, problems, and values, and philosophy, rather than facilitating their mutual understanding, became divided as well.

Friedrich Schiller saw the post-revolutionary period as a time of profound moral decline and, as if repeating Rousseau's opinion from earlier years, considered intellectual enlightenment itself as the source of deterioration: "Selfishness has founded its system in the lap of the most refined sociality […]."[24] And there

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22 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event: in a Letter*, in: *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 3, London: John C. Nimmo, 1887, pp. 336–340.

23 Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapter in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, London: Fontana Press, 1991, p. 229; Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, pp. 164–182.

24 Friedrich Schiller, "Upon the Aesthetic Culture of Man in a series of Letters, Fifth Letter", in: idem, *The Aesthetic Letters, Essays, and the Philosophical Letters of Schiller*, trans. J. Weiss, Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845, p. 18.

is nothing strange about it. The progress made by the human species and its collective reason had doubtlessly been enabled by scientific specialisation and the distribution of labour; consequently, the price paid for this is the damaged self of the "inner man." Analytical intellect has fragmented the world:

> The state and church, laws and customs, are now rent asunder; enjoyment is separated from labour, the means from the end, exertion from recompense. Eternally *fettered* [italics original] only to a single little fragment of the whole, man fashions himself only as a fragment; ever hearing only the monotonous whirl of the wheel which he turns, he never displays the full harmony of his being, and, instead of coining the humanity that lies in his nature, he is content with a mere impression of his occupation, his science.

Such is the core of the crisis, out of which only the unrestrained development of arts and imagination can show the way, for only a joyous and disinterested aesthetic game is capable of re-bridging the disfigured self as well as society.[25]

At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a widespread sense that history was rapidly accelerating its pace, driven by the powerfulness of human inventive thought, the energy of steam, the awakened passions of the crowds, the concentrated will of Bonaparte. The mysticism of round dates also had its say; the year 1800 seemed to mark a great historical turning point, but what was to be expected with the new century? There had never been such a simultaneous accumulation of enthusiastic predictions and bleak warnings. Condorcet's certainty that nature has set no limits for the improvement of humans and the increase of knowledge, richness, and virtue had not yet been blackened with printing ink, when Pastor Malthus began warning that if mankind could not successfully contain its birth rates, then pestilence, war, and famine would launch their selection. Preachers and men-of-letters also frightened the public with images of the riders of the Apocalypse and stories about the lives of the last humans on earth in end times.[26]

The time had come to square accounts with the Age of Enlightenment which was living out its days in a Europe immersed in revolutionary chaos. There was no-one to match Joseph de Maistre as far as the totality of accusation was concerned. He was, namely, the one who considered the entire epoch a work of satanic pride, with the Protestants, philosophers, and scientists being its most

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25 Friedrich Schiller, "Upon the Aesthetic Culture of Man in a series of Letters, Sixth Letter", in: idem, *The Aesthetic Letters …*, pp. 21–28; Friedrich Schiller, *Upon the Aesthetic Culture of Man in a series of Letters*, *Twenty-Seventh Letter*, in idem, *The Aesthetic Letters*, pp. 138–148.

26 Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle From the 990s Through the 1990s*, New York: Doubleday, 1990, p. 150.

valiant instruments. What could have been more criminal than to convince people – who by nature were beasts, never satiated with blood and violence – that they were free and rational beings, having the right to examine the truths of the faith and secrets of nature, that is, God Himself? After all, "The more human reason trusts in itself, the more it seeks all its resources from within itself, the more absurd it is and the more it reveals its impotence. This is why, in every century, the world's greatest scourge has always been what is called *Philosophy*."[27] Philosophy is the mother of anarchy, it "is a pernicious power whose only aim is to destroy common dogmas, so that man may thereby be isolated, made haughty, selfish, and detrimental to himself and to others." Science decisively assists in this exercise of destruction, for by classifying, breaking up, calculating, generalising, and simplifying reality, it offers but a pretence of knowledge, a superficial understanding of nature and history. It can be useful, but it must be held in check. "The prodigious degradation of characters in the eighteenth century […] has no other cause than the extinction of moral sciences under the exclusive reign of physics and of desiccating algebra."[28] Unbridled, science makes humans "inimical to any discipline, insubordinate with respect to any law and any institution, a natural follower of any novelty."[29]

Since the very beginnings of the Reformation and modern science, the great civilisation of Christian Europe, according to Maistre's verdict, has been contaminated with a contradictory spirit of rebellion and upheaval, one that destroys the bond linking humans and God, the king, and his fellow creatures. Therefore, if the authority of the Church, monarchy, and tradition is not restored, promiscuity and desolation can only intensify, leading to the degradation of man and to a fall of the European nations.

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27 Joseph de Maistre, "On the Sovereignty of the People, Book 1: On the Origins of Sovereignty", in Joseph de Maistre, *Against Rousseau, "On the State of Nature" and "On the Sovereignty of the People"*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996, p. 76.

28 Joseph de Maistre, *An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon, Wherein Different Questions of Rational Philosophy Are Treated*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998, p. 271.

29 "[…] ennemi de toute subordination, frondeur de toute loi et de toute institution, et partisan-né de toute innovation": Le Comte Joseph de Maistre, *Quatre chapitres inédits sur la Russie*, Paris: Librairie d'Aug. Vaton, éditeur, 1859, p. 38. Cf. also Berlin, *The Crooked Timber*, pp. 91–174.

The Mechanical Age

While de Maistre's fanaticism no doubt made him a thinker secluded in his extremities, the response to his rhetorical eloquence filled with traditionalistic overtones gained a broad resonance.

The sensitivities of several generations of romanticists were to be formed in confrontation with a post-cataclysmic world that attempted to redefine and re-establish its hierarchies. Dynasties and churches had to revalidate their once-challenged authority. Tradition ceased to be an involuntary, and thus obvious, regulator of life, and therefore its indispensability called for justification. Meanwhile, the new truths of the empirical sciences, with which young heads were filled through school and university curricula, demanded their due respect. Mechanized spinning mills, steam ships, and the first railroads radically increased the mobility of humans, altering their perceptions of time as well their relation to the world which was transforming before their very eyes under the dictates of quick-witted mechanics. In response to these novelties, curiosity and admiration were mixed with a feeling of dread. In English literature, an insensate Mechanism subordinating humans, society, art, and morality to itself became a popular parable. The question of the period was the price a new Faust would have to pay for the temporary illusion of might. The brutality and shabbiness of early capitalism made the price seem exorbitant to both conservatives and radicals, and might of that sort was not enticing to them. The romanticists' amateurish anthropology in thousands of treatises, novels, and pamphlets from Boston to Moscow gave rise to arguments accusing the Mechanical Civilisation:

The *religious* argument: this new civilisation, born out of the impudence of reason, has stifled the voice of God; it remains Christian only in form; while shunning recognition of the spiritual needs of humans, it has fallen into the derivative paganism of materialism, carnality, and worldliness. Western Europe resembles imperial Rome; it is desperately in need of new missionary work.

The *moral* argument: this civilisation is one of ruthless rivalry, rapacity, and social war; what it triggers in humans is their lowest propensities: acquisitiveness, eagerness to abuse, ambition to rule, craving for conquest – leaving no room for the virtues of magnanimity, loyalty, self-respect, and compassion (for even if the new bourgeoisie have a moral code, it only served to hypocritically veil their egoism).

The *personalistic* argument: this civilisation, based as it is on the division of labour and utilitarian ethics, divides humans into individual functions, turning man into machinery, society into an emporium. Culture becomes an environment of artificialities, appearances, hypocrisies – that is, a mirror of opinions,

amidst which an individual loses the sense of identity, internal freedom, and the dignity of a moral subject.

The *sociological* argument: this civilisation breaks down bonds – families, communities, states – turning humans into lonely atoms connected with others only through a commonality of interests; society thereby becomes a "smashed whole," a "pouring of particles," a "heap of sand," or a "stagnant aggregation" that ultimately yields without resistance to the supremacy of bureaucracy.

The *political* argument: having abolished state barriers and introduced equal rights, while at the same time increasing inequalities in economic and social conditions, this civilisation is creating a society that is founded on exploitation, on the one hand, and on resentment and envy, on the other – and thus undermined by revolution (as diagnosed by both the Right and the Left).

The *national-cultural* argument: urban and industrial civilisation are everywhere alike, and thus, the individual character of national or ethnic cultures is lost as it expands and levels, overall, the variegation of the human world.

The *aesthetic* argument: this civilisation kills the imagination, arts, poetry, and even the very sense of beauty, replacing it with the abomination of factory districts, the monotony of large cities, and the grandiose trumpery of parvenus.

The *ecological* argument: this civilisation irretrievably destroys the landscape, the flora and fauna, carves out forests, poisons rivers and the air, and upsets the harmonious balance between man and nature.

Conceived in England, the poison of modernity has crept hither and thither across Europe, triggering a reflex of imitation in some or repulsion in others. Every revolutionary convulsion was seen, in both the West and the East of the Old Continent, as a herald of a cataclysm that would either change the face the world or thrust it down into the abyss.[30]

Catastrophic moods of this sort crowned the romanticist characterisation of the crisis, which not only conservatives eagerly fed on, but revolutionaries as well, who felt no less distaste for a civilisation that appeared pedantic, huckstering, and industrial. But just as the romanticist phase of criticism had faded, the modernist phase entered the stage – a chapter some historians of culture believe opened with Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*.

But even if we push the commencement of this stage to the turn of the century, with the long Victorian period stretching between the two points, it befits us to recall that, contrary to what some authors seem to claim, this time was not one of a thoroughly optimistic belief in progress. After all, the whole of Europe

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30 Jedlicki, *A Suburb of Europe*, pp. 145–146, 150.

resounded with John Ruskin's or William Morris's exasperated diatribes against an industrial standardisation of labour that killed creative joy, flights of fancy, workers' dignity, and a sense of beauty. Victorian literature portrayed the Machine as a symbol of the profaned sacred order of nature, a poisoning of the physical and moral atmosphere.[31]

Upwards, Meaning Downwards

Although the romanticist criticism of the idea of progress at times abated, it never died out altogether. Its arguments have been modified and expanded till our day, with none of them having been crossed of the list altogether, without our awareness of their pedigree. Interestingly, the sensational achievements in the natural sciences and the technological and economic successes of the progressive Western countries did not weaken the criticism, but have had, rather, the opposite effect. The conservative current of this criticism – defending traditional values against the invading modernity – had weakened, at most, in the central metropolises; still, in Germany, for instance, a country that experienced extremely rapid economic and military development, the anti-modernist reaction appeared with considerable strength and expression.[32]

Generally, however, the fever of innovation that consumed science, technology, and economy and infected politics also rubbed off on the arts which, beginning with the last quarter of the nineteenth century, generated avant-gardes one after another contesting the existing world, bourgeois morality, and the aesthetics of just a little earlier as if they were worn-out. The thing is, though, that modernity, understood as the affirmation of the right to creative individuality, the reckless breaking of moral and aesthetic conventions, and the broadening of consciousness, has little to do with the criteria of progress in science or technology – however ambiguous those latter might be. In a schematic approach, the rationalistic and modernistic projects of intellectual revolution have been at odds, so alien to one another that what was considered progressive by one would be seen as regressive, degenerated, or cursed by another.

In this dialectical constellation, a debate on the crisis of European culture flared up at the century's end with such a force that some of its commentators felt

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31 Herbert L. Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine: the Literary Response to Technology*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969.

32 Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Vorläufer Spenglers: Studien zum Geschichtspessimismus im 19. Jahrhundert*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955; Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

it had only then commenced. The arguments proposed by the romanticist critics were complemented and reinforced. The old literary *topos* of the monster city, or jungle, would be revived, over and over, a place where human individuality and community disappear, while the atomised crowd with its typical pathology of collective hypnosis and moral irresponsibility remains. This unform anarchical mass of *internal barbarians*, having been admitted to civil initiation through the rite of universal suffrage, though formally a subject, was actually an object of democratic policy – manipulated, corrupted, and courted by populists – as many appalled critics of culture believed. Politics were said to be degraded, deprived of ideals and hierarchies, yielding to the whims of impersonal public opinion, and finally, left at the mercy of nationalist and socialist demagogues. Culture has been defenceless ever since; its high ideals and values set against the masses with their primitive needs, vulgar tastes, and egalitarian impulses, and when those needs cannot be satisfied, such masses will put themselves in the hands of any accidental leader who can make use of their suppressed hatred.

As modernist cultural critics inferred, culture could no longer hold itself up. The scepticism of rationalists had eaten away its sacred and immovable foundations which had legitimised its values. From there the path led straight to the conviction that all the truths and duties of man are relative, depending on the nation, epoch, or convenience. No certainty, no pillar remained of the kingdom of instrumental reason; even metaphysical unrest could not find a place in the sterile spiritual atmosphere of the age that had been brought about, as it were, by positivism. Only the arts, poetry, and philosophy could still seek to determine, at times, what is most important for humans: a sense of life, a sense of history.

Friedrich Nietzsche proposed his diagnosis in a manner that was shocking with its radicalism. He demanded a realisation of the fact that the human world had found itself in an axiological void which had of late been referred to as nihilism. Christianity, progress, reason, liberalism, socialism were all dead beliefs, no longer capable of providing order or meaning to the world. He asserted this without grief, emotion, or hesitation. An enemy of soft values, he would turn any argument regarding the progress of humanitarianism or liberalism, the moderation of morals or customs, into yet more evidence of decadence, the degeneration of masculine instincts and the enfeeblement of *the will to power*.[33]

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33 Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Twilight of the Idols," trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, in: *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche. First Complete and Authorised English Translation*, ed. Oscar Levy, Vol. 16, New York: Macmillan, 1911, esp. pp. 85–101. Cf. Krzysztof Michalski, "O nihilizmie historii", *Res Publica*, 1994, no. 11, pp. 16–20.

The prophet of the will to power derided *modern man*, who "stands high and proud on the pyramid of the world-process," believing that the power of science has enabled him to bring nature under control and be fused with it:

> Oh thou proud European of the nineteenth century, art thou not mad? Thy knowledge does not complete Nature, it only kills thine own nature. Match the heights of thy knowledge against the depths of thy capacities. Thou climbest toward heaven on the sunbeams of thy knowledge but also down toward chaos. Thy manner of going is fatal to thee; the ground slips from under thy feet into the dark unknown; thy life has no stay but spiders' webs torn asunder by every new stroke of thy knowledge.[34]

The idea – not a new one, by the way – that the progress of science, technology, and democracy is essentially a race of the blind toward a precipice was from then on to be duplicated by the growing tribe of prophets of the *decline of the West*. Oswald Spengler was the most popular among them. The strength of his historiosophical concept consisted in building the case for his thesis that in the history of every culture, the rise of rationality, science, and self-knowledge characterise, in essence, the phase of decline, a necrosis of the soul. A comparison of the phases of the history of the European West with the phases of ancient history – the old and worn-out classic parallel – was refreshed, extended, and combined with the (also not new) biological metaphor of culture as an *organism*. Thus, every culture develops from *life* and will go on living so long as it incarnates and expresses its soul, blood, race, will, instinct, honour, and action. As soon as it starts to shake and break away from its native soil, it enters the stage of *civilisation*, which is a development toward death:

> The Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture, and in this principle we obtain the viewpoint from which the deepest and gravest problems of historical morphology become capable of solution. Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. They are an *end*, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again. […] The transition from Culture to Civilization was accomplished for the Classical world in the fourth, for the Western in the nineteenth century. […] *France and England* have already taken the step and Germany is beginning to do so.[35]

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34 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thoughts out of Season*, II: *The Use and Abuse of History*, transl. by A. Collins; Edinburgh and London: T.N. Foulis, 1910, p. 76 f. (in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. by Dr. Oscar Levy, Vol. V.).

35 Introduction to: Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, pp. 31–32 [italicised as in the original].

Thus, *death* appears at the *peak*, whereas petrifaction and decrepitude set in at the moment of power-based expansion. This paradox pervades twentieth-century thought concerning the concept of the *fall*. With Spengler, it assumed an extreme form: "The energy of culture-man is directed inwards, that of civilization-man outwards. […] The expansive tendency is a doom, something daemonic and immense, which grips, forces into service, and uses up the late mankind of the world-city stage, willy-nilly, aware or unaware."[36] Machine-based technology is the most sublime expression of this expansion – and the instrument of the doom, or ill fate, that will destroy the *Faustian man*: "The creature is rising up against its creator. As once the microcosm Man against Nature, so now the microcosm Machine is revolting against Nordic Man. The lord of the World is becoming the slave of the Machine, which is forcing him – forcing us all […] to follow its course. The victor, crashed, is dragged to death by the team."[37]

The pathos and grandiloquence of German historical romanticism in its hard and unsentimental Nietzschean variety have thus blended with the prophetic megalomania of a man who seemed utterly convinced that his work solves all the puzzles of human history – those of the past and of the future. In his subsequent writings, Spengler avoided, not without reason, the *pessimism* that was ascribed to him, as he was much more taken with the task of expansion – particularly, German expansion – than with the symptoms of *decline*: "Hardness, Roman hardness is taking over now. Soon there will be no room for anything else. Art, yes; but in concrete and steel. Literature, yes; but by men with iron nerves and uncompromising depth of vision. Religion, yes; but take up your hymnbook, not your classy edition of Confucius, and go to church. Politics, yes; but in the hands of statesmen and not idealists. Nothing else will be of consequence."[38] It is hard to say to what Spengler's opus magnum owed its enormous, though short-lived, popularity: the myth of the West's decline or that proud Prussian hardness; the author's ravishing style or the formidable – though so easy to bring down – scaffold of the structure. One thing is certain: with its catchy (albeit not too original) title, the work appeared at an extremely suitable moment – the first volume of *Untergang des Abendlandes* came off the printing press in the spring of 1918.

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36 Ibidem, p. 37.

37 Oswald Spengler, *A Man & Technics. A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932, p. 46.

38 Oswald Spengler, "Pessimism?", in Oswald Spengler, *Selected Essays*, trans. Donald O. White (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967), p. 153. Cf. the introduction of Andrzej Kołakowski to *Spengler*, Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1981, pp. 5–25; Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*.

And indeed, the First World War, with its paroxysms of ethnic hatred, millions of corpses, and bloody revolutionary harvest, seemed to validate the ever-preaching prophets of the "end of civilisation" – both those who foresaw such an end with spiteful joy and those who still hoped that the verdict could yet be revoked.

Woe Betide Reason

They had a considerable problem to resolve: can this terrifying experience be reconciled with the belief – not yet extinguished – in the high ideals of European culture? Florian Znaniecki, the Polish philosopher and sociologist, considered these ideals sustainable and enduring, perceiving Western civilisation as sound and capable of further development but facing a mortal danger from the all too hasty advances of the plebeian masses for whom the spiritual values of the cultural elites were, as yet, completely alien. Ochlocracy, trivial materialism, nationalism, and bolshevism threatened to crush Western culture: "Living for the purpose of the present time alone, brutally self-satisfied in their ignorance, valuing the visible and immediate benefits alone, the new lords of the world shall use the stones from the old temples to build dwellings for themselves, the way the Egyptian fellahs did. Subtlety of taste, thoroughness of intellectual schooling, profoundness of thought, moderation of action will perish from our life for long ages." All the more so, since revolutions and wars, economic decomposition, and moral anarchy will push Europe back to barbarism, if not to savagery.[39]

Albert Schweitzer, an admirer of the age of Enlightenment, accused the subsequent century, with its exuberant organisation and specialisation, of having produced humans without individuality, deprived of the ability to pass moral judgements on their own. Man "is like a rubber ball which has lost its elasticity, and preserves indefinitely every impression that is made upon it. He is under the thumb of the mass, and he draws from it the opinions on which he lives, whether the question at issue is national or political or one of his own belief or unbelief."[40]

Man devoid of personality, hollowed out, empty, directed from the outside, fearing freedom, became an antihero in literature and in social and psychoanalytical philosophy. A host of authors accused industrial civilisation of surrendering ever-more refined technological means to human robots, human automatons, and insane conjurers. In fantasy novels, such as those of Wells, scientism-related

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39 Znaniecki, *Updaek cywilizacji zachodniej …*, pp. 1023–1024, 1094–1097.
40 Albert Schweitzer, *The Decay and the Restoration of Civilization, The Philosophy of Civilization*, Part 1, trans. C.T. Campion, London: A. & C. Black, Ltd, 1923, p. 30.

enthusiasm and technocratic utopia compete with visions of world wars and apocalyptic cataclysms. The fleeting futuristic dithyrambs in praise of the machine were replaced by visions of a civilisation of degenerate decadents or totalitarian administrators of a mindless society.

The Great Depression of the early thirties and the collapse of the liberal order seen nearly everywhere across Europe fomented a climate of uncertainty and anomy. Monolithic ideologies and movements, strong with their radical rhetoric and discipline, became for many an enticing shelter from the unbearable axiological disorder around them, whereas others saw them as an ominous symptom of the crisis of the bourgeois world.

Everyone sought the essence of the crisis according to their own assumptions; some in the great social processes, and others in the spiritual sphere. Edmund Husserl's attempt was significant. He suspected that the European crisis was originally rooted in a philosophical error – namely, in the erroneous understanding of rationalism since the times of the Renaissance and in the consequently distorted methodology of the sciences.[41]

Time and again, rationalism in any form has been subject to strict judgment. Making direct reference to Joseph de Maistre and also to Dostoevsky, Nikolai Berdyaev announced that the creative energy of the modern age was exhausted, pierced by the spirit of humanism. Industrial capitalism had led humanity to disaster: "The atheistical and hypocritical civilization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries celebrates its triumphs at the same time that its principles are most seriously threatened. It begot the World War, an offspring of its own limitless desires […] The tragedy of the contemporary mess is that nobody in his heart and soul now believes in any political system or social theory." Monarchies and democracies are crashing down, capitalism and communism perish; the only way out from this universal entropy seems to lead towards a society of the New Middle Ages reborn in Christ.[42]

The Second World War more than fulfilled the worst forebodings of the prophets of annihilation. The dismay of intelligent people at the sight of what humans are capable of has created an enormous amount of literature and triggered schemes of research scattered in various directions. The idea became irresistible

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41 Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man", in Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, pp. 178–192.

42 Nicholas Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time, together with an essay on The General Line of Soviet Philosophy*, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Sheed and Ward inc., 1933), 201–202.

that after so many centuries of erecting the beautiful edifices of religion, morality, and law, civilisation remains a thin and fragile shell that is scarcely capable of holding back the instinctive, bestial, or perhaps, daemonic forces of human nature that are ready to escape at the first convenient opportunity. And this is, paradoxically, a relatively optimistic view when one compares it to the conviction that modern civilisation does not hold evil in check but is rather its very source. Are criminal ideologies not the product of historical process and emancipated reason, rather than of the nature of an abstract "man"? Is it not the case that the unrestrained drive for knowledge has chiefly served the human species' rapacious domination of the earth and its resources, or the rule of one part of mankind over the other? And, have not all the values, discoveries, and reason itself been subordinated to the greed for ruling and enjoyment? Has humanity not paid for this by losing its sense of the sanctity and meaning of life?

Moreover, is it not perhaps the case that modern political and social institutions, with their rationally structured offices, governed by calculations of profits and losses, have stifled the elementary human sense of solidarity and responsibility for the other? For should this be case, it means that not only does the civilisational process neither create nor protect any values, but – what is worse – it generates moral blindness and indifference, thus making the existence of genocide's administrators and bookkeepers possible.[43]

These questions, formulated simply and clearly or – quite frequently indeed – in a convoluted and abstruse fashion, that is, in a philosophically sophisticated manner, sought answers in the shadows of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in times when the possibility of nuclear war could not be excluded.

Blessed be the Crisis

Even a most cursory presentation of the main threads of the "crisis discourse" from the last fifty or so years would call for a survey no less ample than the above. Let us therefore be satisfied with a handful of observations that a historian of ideas following the present-day continuation of the old debate finds worthy of attention.

It seems noteworthy that scientists, who until recently had taken almost no part in this debate, have finally joined it. While all the dramatic accusations of scientific and technological civilisation were put forth, "let us stick to our knitting" had been the stance typically taken by scientists, at least those in the natural

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43 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 27–28, 198–200, and passim.

sciences. It is doubtful whether many scientists ever cared about the issue. Philosophising and historicising scientists such as A.N. Whitehead, who were troubled with the ideological and philosophical consequences of scientific theory and with science's responsibility for its technological applications, were, apparently, rare specimens amidst the fauna of academia. This obviously changed with the invention of the atomic bomb, since it had become clear that ceding all responsibility to politicians would be a sign of morally blind opportunism. After all, politicians themselves began insuring themselves by appointing teams of scientific advisors and experts whose position today allows them substantial influence on strategic decisions.

Thus, the role of scientists in forecasting and planning the future has undergone a fundamental change, and consequently, their opinions have became of value in the philosophic and moral discussion. However, their approach has turned out to be different in two significant respects. First, they tend to assume a pragmatic approach. Rather than offering generalised verdicts on civilisation or lamenting over the directions of the transformations, a scientist – a bacteriologist or a geologist, a demographer or an economist – will try to predict the course of spontaneous processes and, subsequently, the outcomes of focused and concentrated interventions. Second, even if facing the negative consequences of discoveries or inventions, a researcher would never opt for restraining cognitive curiosity or technological abilities. The intrinsic value of these motives for action is axiomatic to a scientist, and thus further modernisation would be expected to be instrumental in overcoming any difficulties caused by modernisation.

It is tempting to regard such attitudes as, perhaps, less profound but certainly more creative than repeatedly debating, for the thousandth time, the moral crisis of contemporary times. However, it calls for appreciation that the pragmatic warnings and recommendations of scientists studying large-scale processes normally come across a hard cultural and psychological barrier. People have always posed a greater resistance to rational experimentation than humble nature. To give an example, the considerable reduction of mortality rates in poor countries achieved through the efforts of skilled crews in fighting malaria and other endemic diseases has turned out to be easier than reducing reproduction, which would call for changes in socially sanctioned values and behaviours. As a result, the disproportion caused by this great scientific success has brought about new plagues.

This observation can be extended. The successes of scientific and technological thought in understanding the laws of nature and in transforming the physical environment have continuously exceeded anticipations and the imagination,

whereas the successes in human self-recognition, self-control, and improvement of the moral and social environment (and what is dependent on it) have remained highly problematical. This drastic inconsistency of development has led to a situation where a rather morally primitive species of mammal (despite its sophisticated ethical systems) has at its disposal an unbelievable potential of intellect and technology. This situation is a shared object of concern today for some scientists and certain philosophers, albeit the differences in their ways of thinking and the languages they use seem vast.

People of science find it tough to let go of the concept of progress, even if the use of this word is strictly forbidden by philosophers or cultural anthropologists.[44] Cumulative thinking is typical of science, at any rate; the ethics of learning bear the rather inherent conviction that the subsequent status or condition is more favourable, in at least some respect, than the previous one. The same is true for certain social processes; despite everything, it is difficult to repudiate the idea that preventive vaccination represents a sort of progress, or that there is perhaps some progress being made in the realm of moral ideas and legal norms, however weakly it has left its mark in everyday practice. Despite everything horrible that can be said of modern times, the concept of human rights is its legitimate child, a concept whose impact on political standards is quantifiable.

However, from the point of view of moral philosophy, whose votaries do not like to be disturbed in their despair, progress is a myth of the nineteenth century – whilst today it can only fog the eyes of those naïve simpletons who have not yet realised that the world they live in is completely disenchanted. One can obviously ask whether the conviction about the tragic retrogression of culture, or the total crisis of values in our time, is not an even greater myth. After all, implicit in such assertions is the assumption that there had once existed – in the past more or less remote, or, at least, *in potentia* – some contrasting state preceding the crisis, a crisis-free one, one in which people were (or, perhaps, could have been) more at home in the world, and values safer. We are quite free here to judge that *this* is a case of mythical thinking.

I am not trying to say that our late modern times are completely free of peculiarities. One thing is worth considering. Whenever in the past some rationally concocted social reform was launched, or wherever some new technology forced a change in human customs or habits, human nature – or at least, the habits and customs of ordinary people – as a force of resistance and conservatism always

44   Cf. Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorov, R.H. Pearce (eds.), *Progress and Its Discontents*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

have had to be taken into account. Hence the commonplace, as we have seen, topic of moral criticism of the West, seeing modern Mechanism as a violation of humanity's natural state.

Today, in light of the 20th century's experiences, we see this problem otherwise. The human psyche has proven astonishingly capable of adapting to the dramatically altered social as well as technological environment. Such adaptation involved psychological costs and casualties – but a stagnant society is not free of this either. Having been briefly trained, people have proven capable of functioning in a rhythm that is entirely "unnatural" for them, subjected to previously inconceivable stimulation. In any case, it suffices to observe the impulsive passion and talent displayed by small children for modern technologies to finally give up any ideas about a hostility between nature and modernity.

And yet, to say that we are capable of adapting is too little. Many of the tokens of our contemporary civilisation were created in response to mass demand, which is the most democratic type of voting known to the history of the human race. The shape of today's mass entertainment culture and the accompanying youth ethos has resulted from such popular vote. Similarly, the relative ease with which millions of people, even if driven by fear and hunger, decide to abandon their homes and rearrange their lives in landscapes and conditions entirely alien to them tells us something about a weakening of the resistive force of local traditions – a process to which television, easy communication, and the attractiveness of civilisation's gadgets have all contributed.

Intellectuals have many good reasons to be concerned about such a course of things, and to fear that the development of modern (or postmodern, for that matter) ways of life and perceptions is assuming the shape of a cancerous modernisation, one that destroys traditional values and hallowed practices, abolishes instinctive and cultural restraints, and is getting out of hand – or at least, getting out of the control of those who feel responsible for the world, for the continuity of spiritual heritage, and for the future of the planet. The prevailing situation inspires them today, more than ever before, to be culturally conservative through defending the endangered values that formed the foundation of European culture.

These days, they are advised to lay the task off, though. Modern thought, Zygmunt Bauman informs us, "has inherently been possessed by the lust for lawmaking," such as establishing legal ethical codes, decreeing a rational orderliness, and setting directions for development, and it is known that more evil than good has stemmed from that. Now, an end is put to this mission; the postmodern world seeks and strives for nothing and does not wish to be pushed toward any

universal objective. It gladly welcomes the *grinding of ideals* and the demolition of the ethical systems that have only generated dictatorship and violence; everyone is morally independent from now on, and so responsible on equal footing with everyone else.[45]

The tag attached to intellectuals describing them as self-important *lawmakers* seems too broad, though. This brief survey has mostly portrayed atrabilious bellwethers of disaster rather than enthusiasts of a decreed future. Somehow, as opposed to a scientist, engineer, or another specialist, a philosopher or cultural critic is a sceptic and malcontent by the very nature of his or her vocation. The periods when intellectuals endeavoured to replace their innate sense of the tragic nature of history with ideological zeal and visions of a glittering future are not, in and of themselves, something to be proud of. Anxieties and admonitions are their proper output. While many of these smack of, as I have endeavoured to show, hysteria or obsessive moralising or incessant repetitions of the same motifs over the ages, how futile the history of European thought would have been without them! It is sometimes hard to tell whether the importance of those warnings and prophecies ought to be measured in terms of how many of them have turned out to be apt and penetrating or by the taking into consideration the share that have fortunately not been proven true, possibly because they were articulated just in the nick of time.

In the final years of the twentieth century, as the information technology revolution is gathering momentum, and the ideal of a multicultural world is nearing fulfilment – as amusingly demonstrated by the vast menus of dishes for the consumer to choose from or the collection of a hundred ethnic fast-food bars and restaurants under the single roof of an American-style mall – the time is ripe again for the theoreticians and visionaries of *crisis*. Cranks (who are always there) aside, they do not usually attempt to repress the irrepressible and do not offer panpipes in place of the World Wide Web. Most of them are composing their texts on good personal computers. Nevertheless, their obsessions have remained similar to those of Jean-Jacques and his heirs.

Their negative obsession is a universal modernity where the constructive and entrepreneurial genius of humankind does not increase its collective wisdom, leaving mortals in deep spiritual want and a severe atrophy of belief in anything beyond the horizon of everyday interests. Their positive utopia is the concept of a small community that, not being oppressive, would remain supportive to

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45 Zygmunt Bauman, *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej*, Warsaw: Instytut Kultury, 1994, esp. pp. 70–84.

individuals, being a source of identity for them and a space for personal bonds between neighbours. Part of this positive utopia is also the idea of man who, having increased his knowledge and the instruments of his might a hundredfold, is not satisfied with the role of a demiurge bending over the grand keyboard of the world or the role of a voracious acquisitor of delights and amusements, but sometimes ponders on the sense and destiny of his temporary existence on this earth.

These longings are probably unrealisable but they are also indestructible, and so as long as they don't expire, the blessed state of crisis will endure.

Postscript (1999)

As I mentioned in the Introduction, the above essay, written in 1995, enjoyed the good fortune of inspiring a number of interesting discussions, some published and others finding their way into my notes. Below, I would like to refer to some of the arguments that appeared in them.

Jerzy Szacki drew my attention to the fact that my story should have started with Hesiod, since "the idea of crisis, or degeneration, is almost an eternal one."[46] However, based on what I know, the idea of European civilisation was alien to Hesiod, or even to Socrates, and it is European civilisation that was the topic of our discussion (as demonstrated in the essay's subtitle).

I am only looking back to the time in history when the concept of civilisation appeared as the harvest of human knowledge, inventiveness, labour, refinement, and breeding; in a word – the concept that humans create their own history, for better or for worse. This can be worded in terms of the recognised responsibility of the human race – or, at least its enlightened guides – for the said civilisation, and for Europe. I am dealing with the consequences of this conviction, and this has not much to do with myths of decline, cyclical philosophies of history, or millenarist prophecies.

I therefore stand by my concept of *three centuries*, having been granted consent from the other disputants. I pondered somewhat longer, however, over Szacki's suggestion that an essential novelty of the recent centuries is the idea of a "crisis without continuation, death without a rebirth, a fall without redemption – a crisis that, rather than being a moment of truth and perhaps a redeeming turning point, is a time of death throes."[47] The problem is, though, that the source texts sometimes prevent a clear discernment of these final desperations

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46 Jerzy Szacki, "Więcej i mniej niż trzy wieki", *Znak*, 1996, no. 1, pp. 54–55.
47 Ibidem.

from promises of rebirth after the crisis. Among such promises, Karl Marx's forecast is definitely the case, for instance, as well as a majority of the Christian catastrophisms. And Nietzsche too, with his *Übermensch* concept. And Spengler as well, perhaps – although he sees one civilisation wither whilst another is in bloom. This being the case, the *finalists*' church would mainly include those who were or are certain that industrial civilisation will finally and conclusively exterminate life on Earth, or will at least cause a complete degeneration of the human species. Catastrophism devoid of any hope seems, however, to be a rare phenomenon in the history of thought, and I doubt whether such catastrophism is a new sign of the times.

A recurrent question in our discussion involved to what extent the crisis experienced these days differs from that of a hundred, two hundred, or even three hundred years ago. Professor Barbara Skarga was of the opinion that the sense of crisis has deepened and become more dramatic; according to her, "technological civilisation has destroyed that which is spiritual" and is *natural* in us, leaving us "poised to claim that the twilight of high European culture has arrived, the twilight of its traditional values." Still, she advises us to resist the mood of desperation, and offers sharp arguments against the heralds of *the end of man*, such as Derrida.[48]

A historian of intellectual and ideological climates can only note that the conviction about the exceptional profoundness of a given crisis was present in earlier periods too, which allows one to approach such diagnoses somewhat sceptically. But, would such scepticism not imply a risk of callousness? Ewa Bieńkowska, who read my intentions the most accurately, fears so. She vividly juxtaposes two roles: "An exponent of the times as unique, when the development of means and human potential has led us to the threshold of a global endangerment […] perceives the historian as a trifler who, by employing analogies with the past, is willing to stave off his own fears and those of his contemporaries. Hence, he is not preparing them appropriately for confronting what is new and incomparable. The historian, in turn, sees yet another incarnation of a permanent cultural function: the prophetic function."[49]

Some of the participants in the discussion accused me of leaving the idea of what constitutes a *crisis* free to anyone's qualifications, and that I never tried to propose an objective definition of what determines a *crisis*. However, the content of notions such as *crisis* or *decadence* is conditional upon the assumed scale

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48   Barbara Skarga, "Tożsamość i humanizm", *Znak*, 1996, no. 1, pp. 26–34.

49   Ewa Bieńkowska, "Błogosławiony stan kryzysu", *Znak*, 1996, no. 1, pp. 35–42.

of values. For one person, excessive rationality in thought and deed can be a manifestation of crisis and for someone else, a deficit of such rationality is a crisis (assuming that they both share the notion of rationality – which is by no means certain). For one person, the excessive speed of civilisational changes is seen as the cause of a crisis and one's shaken sense of security, while for another, the inhibition of changes and stagnation would be the root of the problem.[50] Increased freedom, particularly freedom of conscience and the promulgation of one's views, is a sign of progress for some, whilst for the others, it is a source and evidence of spiritual anarchy.

The idea of a crisis of culture or the collapse of Western civilisation, similarly to the contrasting idea of progress, rank among the great compound concepts or ideas of the last centuries – I try to avoid the overused and hackneyed concept of *myth*. As these visions are so vague, so far beyond the commonplace and so emotionally heated – marked with enthusiasm or despair, belief in humanity or certitude of its bestiality, expectation of a coming age of order and justice or a sense of the tragic flow of history – that their potential for mobilising the public imagination is enormous. At the same time, however, they have been and continue to be too general for a cold observation of the course of events and the state of mind necessary to corroborate or invalidate them. I can see no way to avoid subjectivism in this matter.

Am I supposed to more clearly declare my own inclinations or judgments on this point? Perhaps yes, since some of my discussion partners considered my essay pessimistic and others, optimistic. Ewa Bieńkowska came to the conclusion that I am a "pessimistic anti-catastrophist and an unexpectedly positively-inclined anti-enthusiast." And I am most willing to consent to this statement. Indeed, the exaggerated counter-modernisation rhetoric and the saddling of the Enlightenment and sciences with responsibility for all of the calamities of mankind prompts ironical comments on my part, just as does the naïve belief, though rather infrequent today, that the world in general is on the right track.

It can be deemed paradoxical that so many people displaying such great inventiveness have created, and continue to create, a world where so many people – including themselves – suffer so severely in body and spirit. Those, however, who see a particular escalation of evil and absurdity in today's deficient and corrupt civilisation, explicitly or implicitly assume that it was somehow cosier, safer, and

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50 Roman Galar, "Ćwierć wieku frustracji: czy nadzieje na postęp zawodzą w ostatnich czasach?", in Janusz Reykowski and Tadeusz Bielicki (eds.), *Dylematy współczesnej cywilizacji a natura człowieka*, Poznan: Zysk i S-ka, 1997, pp. 124–126.

more familiar in the days of yore. This paves the way for various subconscious as well as conscious idealisations of the past – as was the case with the orderly, optimistic, and *self-conceited* nineteenth century, whose legend even historians sometimes tend hold up for the sake of sharpening the contrast with the century that followed.

Tadeusz Bielicki's opinion appeals to me. This anthropologist, from his position on the borderline of the natural and social sciences, reminds us that

> public executions, usually preceded by sophisticated tortures, for instance, remained part of the order of the human universe accepted as normal until modern times; the same was the case with killing prisoners of war, slaughtering the inhabitants of conquered towns, ritual murders, or treating the mentally ill in ways we find hair-raising today; the same holds true for flagellation, slavery, and backbreaking physical labour performed by children. All these practices are not only more and more often universally condemned nowadays as barbaric, they are also being eliminated with increasing efficiency. […] In spite of all the dark scenarios, the so-called developed world is evolving, despite everything, towards a diminished, rather than increased, scope of *savagery and barbarism* as far as human relations are concerned.[51]

Clearly, nobody can believe today that this progress (why shouldn't it be called so?) has ever been, or may ever be, a linear phenomenon, occurring without tragic traps, breakdowns, or collapses. Culture incessantly bickers with the aggressiveness encoded in our genes, if it does not serve it; moreover, culture gets constantly entangled in its own contradictions and the antagonisms of discordant values. The accelerated emancipation of previously illiterate masses of people, together with the enormous increase in the world's population, has outpaced chances for even the most modestly understood mental and moral education. While solving problems, modern civilisation creates more and more new ones through its own momentum. Thus, its constant state is that of a shaky balance, a critical condition. A crisis of culture, however it is defined, is culture's normal state, rather than an exceptional situation; there is no magic spell, prayer, or philosophers' stone that would help it escape this condition.

And it is a good thing. After all, progress is born of misfortune, awe, and rebellion. Medicine was born out of rebellion against man's helplessness in the face of pestilence. The environmental protection movement and its successes have arisen from the dread that our globe is becoming a stinking cesspool. Human rights and the humanitarianism of penal codes have stemmed from an aversion to oppression and debasement. The sense of a crisis of values implies the will to

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51 Tadeusz Bielicki, "Piękny wiek XX", *Znak*, 1996, no. 1, pp. 70–73. Cf. Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost, further explored*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984, p. 282.

defend them – a trend that becomes threatening only when it strives for perfection. This was my train of thought when I described the "state of crisis" as *blessed*.

But blessed it is for one more reason: this never-ending dispute on the maladies of the age, the moral flaws of modernity, the spiritual emptiness of technological society – albeit often monotonous and naïve, full of clichés and stereotypes – is nonetheless a cultural value per se. The most precious literary and philosophical works grew from a fearful concern for the moral condition of the world and the human soul.

So let us not look for *signs of hope* that the crisis of values might come to an end, God willing.[52] This would be the real death of European culture, a culture where eternal self-criticism is a beautiful and, hopefully, inalienable feature. Values are never permanent or safe, as what is obvious for everybody is neither valued nor protected. Values are fragile by nature and contend with one another, forcing us, both philosophers and the unschooled alike, to constantly make our choices among them – and to always fear for them. That uncertainty and anxiety is always there, and every now and then somebody sounds the alarm of a crisis in values.

Let it last!

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52 "Czy koniec kryzysu?", a questionnaire, *Więź*, 1998, no. 2, pp. 25 ff.

Chapter 2. Gloomy Stereotypes of the West

The European West has always been the main point of reference for the Polish intellectual elite, present in its literature and political thought. Throughout the Jagiellonian period, in spite of the union with Lithuania and the country's eastward expansion, Poland strengthened cultural ties with the West, a trend that peaked in the sixteenth century. These bonds weakened later on in the years of the Counterreformation and in the first half of the eighteenth century, a time when the noble culture assumed an Oriental flavour – at least, in the eyes of Western observers. As a matter of fact, Sarmatism was an indigenous phenomenon as to customs and mentality, whilst it isolated Poland and Lithuania from the rapid stream of civilisational transformations in the West. And even then, in spite of intensified xenophobia and the self-righteousness of the Polish nobility, the sense of Poland's affiliation with Europe – with the universe of Latin Christianity which the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was to feed with her grain and shield with the breasts of her knighthood so that the other nations could further enhance their sciences, arts, and craftsmanship – did not decline.

This Sarmatian dogma, upon which rested the illusory belief that Poland was indispensible for Europe, was vigorously attacked by promoters of Enlightenment ideas in Poland, beginning with the late years of Augustus III Wettin's reign. The West reappeared in their writings time and again as a standard for the backward Commonwealth to follow. The model was, however, selective and diverse. The projected political reforms most frequently held up "free" countries, with an efficient "republican" government (which in Poland lacked efficiency), as a constitutional model. England, the Netherlands, and Switzerland were at the fore; Sweden and Venice were also referred to, but not as frequently. The United States of America was listed later on, and even took the lead. Although France under Bourbon reign was clearly unpopular as an absolute monarchy, the French language, as in almost all the rest of Europe, became for educated Poles the international means of communication as well as a social fashion of the upper classes, and at least a superficial knowledge of the French philosophers was considered part of good upbringing. Polish economists popularised the ideas of the French physiocrats and German cameralists, and wrote with admiration about English technological inventions. Journeys of magnates, young masters, priests, and scholars to the West became fashionable again. It was in the same direction, particularly to Saxony and France, that the first wave of Polish political emigration rushed during and after the Bar Confederation (1768–1772), as did the

second wave that followed after the 1792 defeat, paving the way for the Second Partition of Poland.

The cosmopolitan and occidental attitudes of Polish Enlightenment luminaries, with King Stanislaus Augustus at the fore, decisively obstructed their popularity among conservative nobles, without whom no crucial reform of the state could possibly be carried out. Hence the gradual and adaptive change in their style and tactics. After the First Partition, the modernisers with increasing frequency and force stressed the compatibility of their proposals with national tradition and derided the aping of alien novelties in fashion, customs, and philosophy – even when they themselves had introduced them.

The collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the hopes for its rebuilding, together with the victories of the French Revolution and later on, much more strongly, the triumphs of Napoleon, reinforced the pro-French orientation of Polish the enlightened strata and large groups of the nobility; French influences in Polish culture and, obviously, in the constitutional and legislative system of the Duchy of Warsaw appeared in parallel. This distinguished position of France and the obstinate belief in its special interest in Poland's independence survived the fall of the Empire and the new partition of Poland instituted at the Congress of Vienna, as well as a number of subsequent disappointments. Hence, finally, the frontiers of Russia, Austria, and Prussia marked the divided parts of a country whose property, political, and intellectual elites were strongly Francophile and preserved a strong sense of bond with the liberal current (in the broadest sense of the word) of Western culture. Since, however, attempts at establishing relations with the sovereigns were made after 1815 in all three provinces, with Polish political thought and praxis following the trend (chances for autonomy initially seemed promising, at least in the Kingdom of Poland under the sceptre of Tsar Alexander I), references to the West, losing nothing in importance, began shifting again from the sphere of current politics to considerations on the type of civilisation. This is the point of departure for our investigation.

It is telling that the traditional Polish notions of "Europe" and "the West" that were established in the first quarter of the 19th century included France and England; these two countries – with all their differences – were regarded as the models for a new civilisation. The Netherlands and some German countries were mentioned too, but without Austria and Prussia; for quite obvious reasons, relations with the partitioning countries and their cultural influences were a separate issue for Poles.

Richly attested in Polish literature of the period 1815–1830, the attitudes toward the West, defined in such terms, were continually marked with an

ambivalence of the sort that has already been mentioned. After the loss of independence as a state and, no less importantly, the division of the Polish lands and population among three states (or rather four, as the Kingdom of Poland should be treated separately than the territories integrated in the Russian Empire), each of which imposed their own legal and administrative and educational systems, preservation of the Polish cultural identity became the primary imperative and a condition for future revival. Hence the peculiar cult of history, the attachment to national tradition, and the defence, sometimes pietistical, of the purity of the language. And along with this, the constantly renewed calls for stemming the tide of foreign influence; in practice, this mainly meant curbing the influence of French culture, which decidedly prevailed over the German influence and even more so over the Russian influence. On the other hand, the excessively conscientious fostering of tradition and "nationality," albeit a necessary strategy for self-preservation, threatened to stifle developmental impulses. Polish liberals, who drew the ideas of representative government and constitutional freedoms from England, or from the writings of Benjamin Constant, were perfectly aware of this, as were the professors who introduced Western scientific theories and research methods into the Polish universities of Krakow, Wilno, and Warsaw, and all those who desired to modernise agriculture and lay the foundations for modern industry. Their approach was that the critical use of Western experiences and their reasonable adaptation to local conditions was a precondition for economic, social, and educational progress.

Polish economists of the period (Wawrzyniec Surowiecki, Frydreryk Skarbek, Dominik Krysiński), for that matter, considering it necessary for Poland to be pushed onto the track of industrial development, were nowise uncritical of the assumptions of liberal economy and, all the more so, of the English model of industrialisation. They sought, at least in theory, a path of development that would spare Poland from the dramatic experiences of the proletarianisation of rural areas, inhuman factory labour conditions, and dangerous class conflicts. Such a system of the realistic and selective reception of foreign models offered no room for naïve enthusiasm for industrial civilisation or its negative stereotypes.

And yet, in the very heart of this new civilisation – in England, above all – its progress was accompanied by critiques that undermined its very foundations. Conservative commentators, beginning with Edward Burke, attacked the doctrines of contractual society and free competition; for them, the decomposition of communal and corporate communities, the disappearance of interpersonal and hierarchical bonds and interdependencies, was a symptom of fall, rather than development. Social radicals like William Cobbett saw industrialism and

capitalism (*avant la lettre*) as the main source of poverty, social injustice, and the dehumanised labour process. The romanticists – Coleridge, Southey, and others – believed that the primacy of economic values (for which they blamed economists, the alleged lawmakers of the new society) brought about the degradation of the human spirit, nature, and the arts.

All these threads converged in Carlyle's pompous tirades against the Mechanical Age that was destroying human nature and in his vision of a never-ending revolution of the Sansculottes. This trail of accusation, revolt, and abomination brought about by cold learning and modernity, the bustle and fumes of big cities, and utilitaristic ethics would continue for a long time, even to our century. The literature of this model country of secular science, technology, industry, and capitalism expresses dismay time and again that humans could have built something so inhuman as industrial society. For conservatives and radicals alike (if they are easy to discern), the City, Machine, and Money became incarnations of the daemonic forces inherent in human nature, in the nature of capitalism – or, simply, in Nature. Such a morally and aesthetically abhorrent civilisation was doomed to perish, and indeed, sober, mercantile Victorian England issued a whole brood of prophets of annihilation and revival: catastrophists and utopians.

Similar ideas, trickling from England, France, or Germany, easily caught on in less-developed countries but underwent an immediate change in function. Self-criticism of one's own culture became a denunciation of an evil that was only threatening from the outside, an evil that could, and indeed must, be resisted – while there was still time – through reinforcing the different, higher values of the native culture.

Ideas normally migrate much faster than the material foundations of a civilisation. The derivative and plagiaristic critique of economy and industrialism in a preindustrial society and the criticism of Mechanism in a country that was still semi-feudal became a defensive stereotype. This bleak stereotype of *the West* pullulated in Polish literature both at home and in emigration in the three decades between 1831 and 1861 to such an extent that only a fraction of this abundant documentation can be presented here by means of example.

The young romanticist movement played an essential part in the formation of this negativistic image. Romantic poets and critics in Poland, like those in Germany or England, gave expression to their distaste for the cosmopolitan legacy of the Enlightenment and its rationalistic and empiricist simplifications which they considered incapable of discovering the *living truths*. Commercialised metropolitan civilisation aroused their contempt most of all. Polish romanticists were considerably familiar with the philosophical and literary movements in

contemporary Europe, as well as with the Western dispute over the shape and the future of civilisation. They became anti-Occidental insofar as they believed that utilitarian and commercial ethics took precedence over the ethics of sacrifice and freedom. And they shared this concern with representatives of other currents in Polish literature and politics.

As has been said, political economy seemed to many a thinker and author of the period a collection of commandments of a degenerated ethics; its simplified theoretical assumptions related to the incentives behind the actions taken by business were seen, quite commonly, as norms of antisocial conduct. This approach from the West soon filtered into Poland. In 1829, Feliks Bentkowski, a known Warsaw-based bibliographer and literary critic, wrote in his review of a Polish edition of a French economic dictionary that the principles of political economy seemingly "undermine the social union, debase people by turning them into simple calculating machines, and uproot the principles of morality and good manners which […] are said to be a prerequisite for the existence of nations."[53]

This opinion soon became common and was often repeated. It became fashionable to set economics and the Gospel against each other as two contradictory canons of morality of which one or the other would ultimately confer the law to European civilisation.

After the defeat of the November Insurrection (1830–1831), a new, specifically Polish reason for aversion to the West appeared, namely, a profound bitterness with the attitudes of England and France, whose liberal governments and parliaments had taken an indifferent stance toward the Polish war for independence. Also, Polish political exiles who had found refuge in these countries felt, in most cases, like outsiders amongst a bourgeoisie that was concerned with their own interests. It was at that time that a picture of the West enshrining the idols of trade and prosperity and proving indifferent to the *living truths* and to the struggles of the enslaved European nations against despotism was established among the émigré communities. This diagnosis was nearly unanimously shared by the exiles; those who tried to challenge it in the name of the universal values of liberalism and economic progress were few and far between.

Aversion toward the huckstering West was voiced particularly strongly by the ideologues of the Polish People's Communes (*Gromady "Ludu Polskiego"*),

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53 Quoted by Konstanty Krzeczkowski, in: Fryderyk Skarbek, *Pisma pomniejsze*, vol. 1, Warsaw: Szkoła Główna Handlowa, 1936, p. XXII (Introduction); cf. Jedlicki, *A Suburb of Europe*, p. 117.

a radical democratic movement that was organised in England and on the Isle of Jersey which leaned towards a sort of Christian communist utopia. They reprimanded the more moderate leaders of the French-based Polish Democratic Society (*Towarzystwo Demokratyczne Polskie*), claiming that the Society, intending to preserve the institution of ownership, "shall transform the agricultural country into an industrial one, create a mighty cast of moneylenders, potato and cheese aristocrats, and masters of workshops and stores, a covetous and squalid caste, without the feelings characteristic of a higher creature, a race that Christ, in holy wrath, would castigate with a lash […]."[54]

Official Orléanist France of the restoration period epitomised all the loathsome traits of political and mercantile egoism for the democratic Left, as well as for the romantic poets. This, however, did not exclude a belief in a different France, a republican or (as in Mickiewicz) a Bonapartean one which preserves the sacred flame of liberty and aspirations for a revolutionary fraternisation of peoples. Thus, condemnation of the bourgeois system of values and of the political elites of the West nowise precluded the participation of Polish exiles in European intellectual life and, indeed, their connections with oppositional and revolutionary formations. Mickiewicz, for instance, combined his numerous accusations of the West as a degenerate civilisation with impatient anticipation of the day when European nations would unite under the command of France on the rubble of the Holy Alliance and the entire odious order of the Congress of Vienna. The Spring of Nations marked the climax of such hopes – and their end.

When it comes to discussing stereotypes and clichés, one perforce becomes less interested in the views of uncommon minds and original philosophical constructions or visions of the world, and more in what was part of common circulation and was expressed in the output of *minorum gentium* authors, journalistic articles, political commentaries, and party programmes.

There is abundant evidence of the anti-Western stereotype in the writings of Polish traditionalists and conservatists, who tried to reinforce among their fellow-countrymen the conviction – one with an old, noble pedigree – that there is nothing to be envious of in urban and secular civilisation. Many authors even claimed that having a weak bourgeoisie was beneficial to Poland and its future. It is the village home and neighbourly bonds that are the mainstays of Polishness, Stefan Witwicki argued in Paris. "And thank God, this is the case. Looking at the

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54 Hanna Temkinowa (ed.), *Lud Polski: wybór dokumentów*, Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1957, p. 116; cf. Ewa Morawska, "Wielka Emigracja o problemie swoistości kultury polskiej", in Jerzy Kłoczowski (ed.), *Uniwersalizm i swoistość kultury polskiej*, vol. 2, Lublin: Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, 1989, p. 68.

matter deeper, other countries might not be envied in this respect, and no great growth of cities might be desired."[55]

At home, where the idea of "organic work" was already taking shape, opinions of the West were more diverse. The stereotype of a West preoccupied with material interests took prevalence in the conservative literary output in the Russian Partition – reproduced many a time by the rightist extremist Henryk Rzewuski, the Christian moralist Józef-Ignacy Kraszewski, and by hundreds of lesser-known authors. The dark tones, dismal admonitions, and portents reached their highest mass in the reactionary years that followed the Spring of Nations, which had been commonly regarded as a harbinger of a much greater cataclysm. With workers massing in the streets of Paris, socialism came to appear no longer as an idea of high-minded doctrinaires, but as a social force and seemed to foreshadow a decline of the liberal epoch, a revolutionary breakthrough awaited with hope by radicals and with a combination of horror and satisfaction by conservatives.

The stereotype of a "cold" civilisation bringing about a gangrene of the social tissue was similar, again, among both the rightists and leftists. Jan-Kanty Podolecki, an ideologue of the Polish Democratic Society, wrote in Paris in 1849:

> Enlightened Europe has nothing save for forms and negations. Humanity does not live through a form or negation, and therefore life in it is decaying. […] Everything that senses death is plunging in mud, professing golden calves and idols. […] The form that imagined the emerging thought, the sacred and living truth, has remained a form alone once the thought progressed further on, the truth came into life, the sacredness was defiled with blood and dirt. This is how falsehood, hypocrisy, selfishness, conceit, pillaging, and greed wage their war with the letter, assume a form, and rain sacred sand on the eyes of the kind-hearted. Good will has been killed everywhere. No people, no passion. Everything is shrunken, small, seeking moribundity in convulsions, waiting – not knowing what for; talking a lot of progress whilst not believing in it. […] The wellsprings of life are drying out; that which pushed the world is swooning; gloom is embracing everything; all hearts, women's and children's as well, are congealing from the chill. People fear the day, and relish in the darkness.[56]

Conservatists wrote similar epitaphs for the West, liberalism, and bourgeois progress; for them, the coming revolutionary calamity was nonetheless to be a devil's victory. Some still believed that Europe would sober up before running off the edge. "The civilisation of egoism and violence," Antoni Morzycki wrote

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55 Stefan Witwicki, *Wieczory pielgrzyma: rozmaitości moralne, literackie i polityczne*, vol. II, Paris: A. Jełowicki i S-ka, 1842, p. 17.

56 Jan Kanty Podolecki, *Co jest rewolucja i jakie jej stanowisko*, Paris: Maulde et Renou, 1849, p. 26.

in 1852, "[…] is the bane of human kind, and the main task of the present epoch is to retreat from the cold, stifling caves of this civilization, even if they are brightened with flowers."[57]

Józef Gołuchowski, formerly a philosophy professor in Vilnius and at the time a landowner in the Kingdom, painted an even more daemonic picture of a civilisation that,

> indulging in an overly sensuous direction and growing increasingly emancipated form the rule of religion and morality, has aroused a plethora of hitherto unknown sensual appetites, not only among the wealthy, but also among the masses, following their example; these lusts cannot possibly be satisfied, for an appetite once dissolute, outruns at a gallop all the means of satisfaction and there is no-one to keep pace therewith.

Economic rivalry, he argued, damages the bonds between people and arouses war between everyone, up to complete ruin. Bourgeois societies that have lost their Christian moral ties will prove defenceless in face of the approaching revolution of the disinherited masses. The trusses of the construction are creaking; a horrid, and deserved, fall of Europe is nearing: "In the universal calamities, in the universal plagues, individuals are perishing without mercy, the innocent perishing with those to blame, because individual innocence is dwindling in this world before the great dimensions of the higher justice. The triumph of evil, which seems to be coming near, shall respect it all the less."[58]

Poland, and Slavdom as a whole, could only be protected against the disasters of revolution and "social centralisation" through resisting the temptations of capitalism and socialism with it; persistence in faith and in the simple virtues of an agricultural nation – in accordance with the doctrine – meant not a standstill, but a different path of development. The opinion that a new great schism had been taking place within Christian Europe since the eighteenth century became so commonplace that a Warsaw-published encyclopaedia wrote of it in 1861. We read under the entry for *Civilisation*:

> There is, namely, one civilisation that can be called moral, full of simplicity, chaste and innocent; the other is industrial, that is, learned, coupled with the love of richness and extravagance. Religious faith blossoms and inspirations of the heart reside in the former, while the latter shines with the glitter of arts and crafts, with trade, handicrafts, and every [form of] development of intelligence. But with the progress of experience or knowledge does faith perish and the sole strength of interest remaining is the bond of

57   Quoted in: Jedlicki, *A Suburb of Europe*, p. 149.

58   Józef Gołuchowski, *Rozbiór kwestyi włościańskiej w Polsce i w Rossyi w r. 1850*, Poznan: W Komisie księg. J. K. Żupańskiego, 1851, pp. 194–200, 533, 689.

security that ties people together. […] It is under the pressure of such civilisation, which is today amongst us popularly called the civilisation of the West, that poetical songs and inspirations of the fine arts come to a stop; everything is submitted to cold calculation and appreciated against the weight of gold. Alas! We must admit that such a civilisation seems to be characteristic of the nineteenth century.[59]

The multi-voiced indictments and prophecies of annihilation resounding from hundreds of Polish journals and books in the middle of the century naturally triggered a defensive reaction as well. Liberal optimists, overwhelmed by the defeats of the 1840s, were slowly regaining their belief in revolutionary progress, in the West, and in Europe. Józef Supiński, a Lwów-based precursor of Polish Positivism who had spent many years in the West, responded to the Polish moralists:

Do not render England or France odious to us, for England and France rule this world, and we heed the whole of the world; do not call their lives a "muddy puddle", as this puddle produces people amongst whom you cannot shine; do not blemish their foresight with the name of egoism, for this egoism makes sacrifices for the *res publica* of which we are not even capable of daydreaming. The matter you are willing to taint is a condition and symptom of existence on the earth.[60]

A few years before the January Uprising, optimists created a powerful tribune in Warsaw – the daily newspaper *Gazeta Codzienna (Polska)* published by Leopold Kronenberg, which spread grandiloquent propaganda of Western science, economy, and industry. After two trips to the west, the journal's editor, Józef-Ignacy Kraszewski, renounced the bleak stereotype he had once contributed to with the deepest conviction. In 1861, he wrote that Western civilisation is referred to as "material," for it indeed begets a certain shiver in people, and strips life of dreams and illusions, but he hastened to add,

elsewhere, almost these same effects are extracted by destitution, lack of education, and the accompanying belief in some sort of fatality that governs the world. The greatest gift of civilisation is, perhaps, the relaxation of human relations in general, attaching to them emotional form even where sentiment is lacking […] and, civilising that struggle of life that is the most hard, as it verges on brutishness. […] Justice makes one accept that everything proceeds according to the divine law of progress, nothing good can be expected from torpor, and the reactionaries who see a utopia in it are blind, or of ill faith.[61]

59 Fryderyk H. Lewestam, "Cywilizacja", in *Encyklopedyja Powszechna*, vol. 6, Warsaw: Orgelbrand, 1861, p. 109.

60 Józef Supiński, *Szkoła polska gospodarstwa społecznego*, Lwów: nakładem Kajetana Jabłońskiego, 1862, p. 188.

61 Piotr Chmielowski (ed.), *Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. Wybór pism*, vol. 9: *Zarysy społeczne*, Warsaw: druk S. Lewentala, 1894, pp. 763–765.

Cyprian-Kamil Norwid, a poet-philosopher, expressed a similar ambivalence and, as it were, a sense of suspension in his 1860 treatise on Juliusz Słowacki: "Still are we barging on, still are we meandering between this untraditional civilisation, whose great practicality is oftentimes highly unkind, and our traditional civilisation, whose great kindness is highly unpractical; still are we, and BARELY so, people of the nineteenth century, in a word."[62]

It was only ten years after the January Uprising (against Russia, in 1803) – when the Positivists came forward with their programme to "pierce the windows to Europe," and when also a considerable faction of Polish conservatives from Krakow changed over to an occidental position – that this negative stereotype of bourgeois civilisation was in retreat, forced out by an awareness of the close and lasting relations between Polish culture and the West. Nevertheless, the dispute over the values and iniquities of this civilisation carried on in Polish writings, revived time and again in the polemics between traditionalists, liberals, socialists, and peasant activists, just as it was not extinguished in French or English thought.

Let us now try to draw some conclusions.

Like any stereotype, the bleak image of the West – which reached its strongest articulations during Romanticism's maturity and decline, despite being older and enjoying a longer life than Romanticism – fed on a selective observation of real phenomena. Only those perceptions, accounts, and diagnoses that corroborated the previously determined axiology made it through the filter of strong emotions, yielding, in effect, a monochromatic and one-sided image which, as it solidified, grew increasingly resistant to confrontation with experience and empiricism.

What were the social sources of these emotions? It is easiest to point out the trauma of adaptation, the resistance that is usually put up by the old classes to changes that threaten a disintegration of the traditional culture, the demolition of its inherent order of values and social hierarchy. It is a known, indeed, that a similarly constructed stereotype of Western civilisation – laicised, materialistic, and consumerist – appears in every country facing its expansion, and it is always the case that this image is contrasted with an idealised picture of the native culture, be it purely national or part of some broader hypothetical whole, such as the culture of pan-Germanism, Slavdom, Islam, Africa, etc.

But was resistance to change and the fear of it really so commonplace and strong in nineteenth-century Poland? It is hard to find evidence of it. At least

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62 Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *O Juliuszu Słowackim w sześciu publicznych posiedzeniach*, Paris: L. Martinet, 1861, p. 16.

until their enfranchisement, the peasant masses had too little contact with Western works of material culture and even less with the output of European intellectual or political culture for the issue to have ever appeared within their perception. While the stereotypes of the Jew, Muscovite, or German could, to some degree, have been a perverted generalisation of common experience, no such thing can be said of the stereotype of the West. As concerns the landed gentry and, specifically, so-called high society, moralistic and comedy literature had been accusing them since the Enlightenment era of enjoying and relishing in foreign novelties, the charms of urban life, travels to the West, and things French. However superficial and snobbish such reception of alien models could have been, the very orientation of that snobbery would nowise attest to some common disinclination for the West. The professional intelligentsia, meanwhile, was the most thoroughly Occidentalised social stratum. Political émigrés were the only group whose output (letters, memoirs, political manifestos) offers us easy access to evidence of spontaneous aversion and disdain. Their complex of non-adaptation coincided with a strong sense of spiritual foreignness, yet they would normally curse the country of their settlement – be it France, England, or America – rather than "the West" in general.

Before the notion of "the West" struck root in the colloquial language – so that, coupled with its antonymic notion of Russia, the two could set the poles of political orientation – it was originally an ideological construct which was supposed to strengthen the conviction about a civilisational split of Europe into a German-Roman and a Slavonic part (the latter, with or without Russia), each pursuing different, if not opposite, orders of values. This argument occupied a prominent place in the structure of conservative as well as radical-democratic thought, whereas it was opposed by liberal organicist centrists who advocated economic and cultural evolutionism.

In Poland, the bleak image of the contemporary West did not originate as a reflexive response to contacts with an alien culture; it evolved, in fact, as a didactic stereotype, devised – together with a positive stereotype of the Polish national character – to reinforce the humiliated nation's impaired self-esteem and valorise its native tradition, however variously reconstructed. If the frequency of a duplicated matrix can ever be used as a measure of social attitudes, the ratio would apparently be reverse in this particular case: the more attractive the Western ideas, technologies, and consumption patterns turned out to be in our country – and, consequently, the faster their penetration into the various social classes – the stronger was the scorn for the West expressed in literary works, writings, and press commentaries. Moreover, intensified national oppression

exerted by Russia or Prussia usually brought on a new wave of warnings against the West. This, no doubt, can be partly explained by the disillusionment caused by the Western countries' indifference to Poland's struggles for freedom. Another, and parallel, reason was that fear of denationalisation pushed the local intelligentsia to ardently defend Polish cultural identity, even if the threat was coming from a different side altogether. The Russian civilisational offer seemed, overall, not too enticing to Poles and, indeed, not too menacing at least until the years that followed the January Uprising. Hence, fear of political, economic, and cultural rapacity from one and the same country was primarily expressed as part of Polish anti-Germanism of the Bismarck era.

The struggle against things foreign appears when alien influences become alluring and contagious. But once they have become contagious, no ideological struggle against them will prove effective. Pamphlets attacking and condemning industry, the stock exchange, or foreign capital have not yet prevented industrialisation anywhere where there had already been a demand for factory-made products. Warning the upper and lower social classes against obtaining foreign products and alien ideas has never proved efficient, either. The struggle against cosmopolitanism was an instrumentally ineffectual strategy. Protection of the undefiled sources of Polish culture and historical mission, or of Slavic idyll and simplicity could not by itself develop a civilisational counterproposal that would prove capable of evolving on its own not only in the world of ideas but also in the real social landscape and in rivalry with the mightier nations. In any case, the instrumental usefulness of a stereotype is not the appropriate measure of it. The compensatory function of the idea of the collapse of the West seems to be undisputable. This idea performed the same psychological function as any negative stereotype – namely, externalising the evil. The Devil resides elsewhere; he tempts and debauches us, but does so from the outside. He wears a German frock, prattles in French, and plays the market – but has no access to those who guard the law and nation.

Paradoxically, however, this anti-Western stereotype was copied from English, German, and French writings and so represents evidence of Western influence. Never mind the differences in economic development indices for Eastern versus Western Europe; these are known, more or less. In spite of these quantitative or qualitative differences, the Polish civilisation dispute since the late eighteenth century has belonged to the same discursive area as its Western counterparts. True, Polish tirades against the "materialised" West, with the Polish or Slavic pole added at the opposite end of the axis, served the purpose of creating the effect of a threat from the outside, an alien foe sabotaging from within the besieged

fortress of nationality. Having said all that, the very issues of accusation and defence – with their religious, moral, sociological, economic, ecological, and aesthetic substance – conclusively testify that Polish thought, even if imitatively, was experiencing the internal European cultural conflict.

An inherent part of this culture is, after all, its incessant self-criticism and self-doubt. There has probably been no period in European history since the sixteenth century – and definitely, since the late seventeenth – that would not have been diagnosed by its contemporaries (not to mention historians) as an epoch of crisis, of the fundamental upsetting of social governance and moral values. Permanent crisis, one could say, is the way of existence for a modern science and technology-oriented civilisation which can never attain a balance or stability of its institutions, theories, and practices.

Who could say today, now that we have been through the experience of the twentieth-century, that the apocalyptic visions of the previous century's prophets were naïve?

Yes, their depictions and even their proposed means of salvation may seem naïve today, but not their fears as such. They were struck with fear and terror by a world where the order of mathematics and accountancy had replaced, as they saw it, the orderliness of divine laws and competition replaced the order of traditional authority figures and communities; a world which saw lonely humans, stripped of their legacy, faced with a multitude of contradictory faiths, commandments, and doctrines, with no foothold whatsoever; a world where everything is allowed, and everyone is captive to impersonal forces which can at any time transform into exquisitely personalised violence. Philosophy and politics have been rehashing these themes to this day, and will likely not cease doing so any time soon. Apparently they have not gone out of date.

Both the revolutionary and reactionary anti-Occidentalists hated liberal principles and democratic institutions so much that they could not see that continual rebellion against the principles and institutions was in itself an institutional principle of the functioning of *this particular* civilisation. This is why this civilisation, with each subsequent crisis, creates its own gravediggers, who endeavour to cover it up with sand but instead bring it to a new life. Nineteenth-century optimists, including the Polish advocates of the West and of the idea of progress, deluded themselves in many ways but understood this very well. Hence, they did not yield to despair, nor were they eager to build a new order – be it theocratic or revolutionary – upon the ruins of the old, depraved, and corrupt Europe.

Chapter 3.   City on Trial

Had this been a specifically Polish (or Russian, or Slavic) stance, the issue would have been a relatively simple one. We would say: here is an example of a culture and mentality typical of an agricultural country – one whose civilisational development was delayed – that opposes the bourgeois ethics of competition; through resisting it, warning against it, and despising it, this culture can find within itself, within its own traditions, indigenous values that could serve as a foundation for a different civilisational structure, one which would glisten with exemplary spirit, rather than with gold, and whose governing principle, rather than the combat and rivalry of everyone against everyone else, would be sacrifice and community. We would say that those hopes would turn out to be illusory, for the rural peripheries of Europe were doomed all the same to finally enter the same path of industrial revolution and bourgeois development, except they would always be behind, poor, and envious. And, we would point out that this grudge held against mercantile and rationalised civilisation tends invariably to appear in every country of the world after it has been exposed to its temptations; and, that such a response is a natural and psychologically understandable defence of the value of one's own culture when threatened by the levelling steamroller of capitalism. We would obviously recall that in Poland this reluctance was additionally reinforced by the traditional age-old prejudices, popular amongst the nobility, against town and commerce, prejudices that a young master, born and bred in the countryside, educated in Vilnius, Krakow or Warsaw, and subsequently thrown by history onto the streets and pavements of Paris or London, would not have easily rid himself of, together with his legacy. We would recognise that his repulsion towards Western materialism and smugness came, in some cases, as a response to the trauma related to the troublesome process of familiarisation with and adaptation to a totally different rhythm of life and emotional climate. Yet, we would hasten to add that this resistance, however conservative, served, after all, the public cause and the national revolution, whose sacrificial and self-denying ethos was put at risk by the progressive commercialisation of life and moral awareness.

There is no surprise, then, in the fact that the attitudes of Polish democrats, Russian Slavophiles, Slovak Štúrists (*štúrovci*), Serbian nationalists, and similar ideological constructs have always combined revulsion toward the city and commercial profiteering with reluctance toward the West and the struggle against the plague of foreign influence. This historical linkage between axiology and geography seems obvious. Similarly, the obstinate conviction that Europe is split as far

as its civilisation is concerned – which is expressed in the landscape, economic structures, agrarian laws, political systems, and in the different courses of the nation-forming process and, consequently, in social psychology and the philosophy of culture – bears a certain obviousness.

Anyone who was willing to compile an anthology of Polish texts that give grounds to such a dualism and elevate it to the rank of a doctrine would have plenty to choose from – beginning with the fifteenth century. Janusz Tazbir[63] and other scholars investigating the Polish Renaissance, Baroque, and Sarmatian cultures wrote extensively about the nobility's vision of Europe in their excellent studies, describing a split whole founded upon the doctrine of *antemurale Christianitatis*, or the doctrine of granary and shield. In the years of the Bar Confederation and the Enlightenment, noblemen's resentments directed both against the Polish capital city and foreign influence have been precisely described by Jerzy Michalski[64] and others. We can take a look at a few of the texts that would be part of the anthology's nineteenth-century collection.

Jan-Paweł Woronicz, the Catholic bishop and author of the myth of Assarmot, would unquestionably be one of the featured authors. The story goes that the legendary patriarch of the Sarmatians, Assarmot, allowed the other tribes to dabble and glory in "ingeniously delving into nature," digging into the interior matter of the earth, dealing with commerce and the arts, while assigning the better part to the Sarmatians, that is, knightly fame, the virtues of loyalty, pride, valour, and sacrifice for liberty; it was thanks to them that Europe, safe as it was behind Poland, could cultivate its light and gains.[65]

Maurycy Mochnacki, a talented political writer, would also be featured, both for his writings from before the November Insurrection and, to an event larger extent, for his work from his final, French years, when he wrote that "unlike the Polish peasant, the *tiers-état* cannot become a nobleman. May he be ennobled by whoever and in whatever way, he shall always have it impressed on his forehead that he is a manufacturer, a chandler." In spite of the age-old gap between the two, the peasants and noblemen were members of one tribe, one family, while the bourgeois is alien to it: "That is the difference between the our revolution

63 Janusz Tazbir, *Szlaki kultury polskiej*, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986; Janusz Tazbir, *Poland as a Rampart of Christian Europe: Myths and Historical Reality*, [Warsaw]: Interpress Publishers, 1990.

64 Jerzy Michalski, "'Warszawa', czyli o antystołecznych nastrojach w czasach Stanisława Augusta", *Studia Warszawskie*, vol. 12, Warsaw 1972.

65 Jan Paweł Woronicz, "Kazanie przy Uroczystem Poświęceniu Orłów i Chorągwi Polskich", in *Pisma Jana Pawła Woronicza*, Vol. 4, Kraków: Józef Czech, 1832, pp. 154–156.

and the French one, between the Western and the Slavonic civilisation: France is in the stock-exchange, the vendor's stall, the workshop, and on the street, whilst Poland is only in the countryside, beyond the city."[66]

Excerpts from Adam Mickiewicz's *Books of the Polish Nation and Polish Pilgrimage* would certainly be included; they intensified the sense of a Polish émigré's spiritual distinction from Western mercantilism.

Some quotations would be included from Stefan Witwicki's *Wieczory pielgrzyma* (A Pilgrim's Evenings). This Romanticist author in his younger years became a nationalist and Catholic conservative while in exile. "God," he wrote,

> created an agricultural and a tradesmen's tribe […] the Polish one is purely agricultural. In this fundamental idea there shall always be opposition to all the pretended civilisers who would wish to render Poland organised along the lines of the Western peoples of Europe. Between our system and that of those peoples, there must be a definitive difference like that between Countryside and City. […] For our country, the aim is not to measure itself against England or France some day in terms of towns, but rather, for the countryside to attain its complete development, complete perfection, and complete beauty.[67]

The antibourgeois tirades of the radical ideologues of the Polish People's Communes targeted against the moderate Democratic Society would certainly not be left outside our anthology. This section would be closed with articles by Jan-Kanty Podolecki, that excellent publicist and the most radical Polish critic of bourgeois civilisation, who never ceased emphasising "as has the city in the West, the countryside has impressed its indelible stamp on the entire society with us, and one should never to forget about this, for it is from there that the differences in the civilisation, customs and morals, aspirations, and the entire internal composition of society derive."[68]

A separate part of our imagined collection devoted to theories of civilisational dualism, would include texts by post-Enlightenment liberals, organicists, and Positivists – forming no smaller a body of texts than the "Romanticist" section. These authors usually see the "urban vs. rural" dichotomy, as the opposition of two diverse types of culture and social psyche, whereas the author places himself above it, as a fair and unbiased critic who can discern the bright spots and shadows in both alternatives and thus projects a synthesis of the two orders of

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66 Maurycy Mochnacki, "O rewolucji społecznej w Polszcze", in *Maurycego Mochnackiego pisma rozmaite. Oddział porewolucyjny*, Paris: Księgarnia Polska, 1836, p. 284.

67 Witwicki, *Wieczory pielgrzyma*, pp. 476–477.

68 Jan Kanty Podolecki, "O demokratyzmie polskim", in Andrzej Grodek (ed.), *Jan Kanty Podolecki. Wybór pism z lat 1846–1851*, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1955, p. 12.

values, suppressing the one-sidedness and deficits of each of them. Adam Goltz's frequently quoted article entitled *The city and the countryside in their mutual social relation* is characteristic of this orientation: "There is no progress where there is no duality," says this author, presenting a sort of Christian Hegelianism in his elaborate essay. "The countryside adjusts to the progress of thought reluctantly, for the apparent incidents of civilisation so far […] disturb its uneventful and simple yet comely life, more than enough." The city is the focal point of civilisation and the source of "the might of thought" but it also begets "lusts, ardours, a prevalence of evil, and perversion." Thus, the urban and the rural are both split into good and evil. The solution to the dilemma is both dialectical and erotic: the city represents the male element and the countryside the female one. Hence, it is the calling of the enlightened landed gentry to "wed the rural with the urban"; their "love, conjugal, recognising the rights of them both, is the task for the history of the tomorrow."[69]

Positivists would write about this using a different style. Since they were less sensitive to the intrinsic values of rural culture (peasant as well as landowner culture, to be sure), they charged the bourgeois intelligentsia with the mission of carrying the torch of learning and civilisation, leaving to the rural gentry an intermediate role, at the most. Yet, no unconditional apology of bourgeois morality and the civilised West would ever be found in Positivist authors. Their evaluations of capitalism and liberal progress were almost always seasoned with a scepticism that grew stronger over the years. Aleksander Świętochowski never spared words of disdain with respect to the hypocrisy of Western liberals and, particularly, the "degenerate Manchesterism" of which his weekly *Prawda* wrote that "it needs, of necessity, to get burnt through and purified by fire if it is to preserve those noble elements that are inherent in it, blended with the inferior ones. It is enough to look at it in Germany, England, France, or Austria – in all those places where it proliferated practically, where it has decked the nakedness of its egoism out, and covered it up, with the most sublime slogans."[70]

On the other hand, the Polish literary output offered almost no opprobrious invectives concerning things rural and countryside existence. If there were any, they would have been produced by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, a moralist who in his early definitive anti-Occidental period could tell Volhynian noblemen that their lives were but a barely beastly existence "betwixt the pigpen and the barn."[71]

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69 Adam Goltz, "Miasto i wieś w ich społecznym do siebie stanowisku", *Biblioteka Warszawska*, 1842, vol. 1: pp. 91–123.

70 Aleksander Świętochowski [attr.], "Młody konserwatyzm", *Prawda*, 1885, vol. 43, p. 507.

71 Chmielowski (ed.), *Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. Wybór pism*, p. 67.

Warsaw-based authors and critics could harshly castigate what they called the "nobleman's sociology," but refrained from such pointed diagnoses. As far as the peasant village was concerned, they wrote of it without sentimentality, pointing out – the first to have done this – the immense penury, ignorance, and prejudice. Although they were not overly sensitive to the charms of folklore, they would have never shown disrespect for it. Some Polish socialists, with the young Ludwik Krzywicki at the forefront, caught from Marx the disdainful conviction whereby "rustic life" was "idiotic" – but only for a short time.

The bourgeois pole of the earth's axis was populated in Poland only by factory and apartment-house owners, bankers and stock-exchange gamblers – rather than by writers or cultural critics. The "Positivist" section of the anthology would reveal a vision of society and culture that continually proves dichotomous – with its urban and rural facets, facets of progress and tradition, the Western and the ancestral, the important thing being, though, that the demands of history would thenceforth be the gradual abolishment rather than reinforcement of the so radical opposition of the two worlds, of which none proved deserving of enthusiasm.

Let us leave aside the subsequent – and abundant indeed – sections of the anthology, whose concept has been useful here just as a means of introduction to the subject-matter. It would be easiest, let us repeat, to consider the Polish case against the Metropolis, against the spirit of industry and market speculation, against utilitarian philosophy and the gospel of free trade, as characteristic of a rustic country, essentially nobility and peasantry-based, one where the third estate is composed of Germans, Jews, and native parvenus of yesterday, a country whose estate-based and neighbourly communities have not yet decomposed, and which has not yet fully attained a unity with the frenetic rhythm of metropolitan life. Thus, it has learned more from newspapers than from experience about capitalism, the bourse, the proletariat, machineries, joblessness, party fighting, and the odours of smoke and sewage, rather than the homely dung. As it is known, people tend to most fear novel, not yet familiarised dangers.

Added to that, the towns, urban hubs (particularly the capital city), literary salons, coffee-houses, and (where there was no university) bookshops had since the late eighteenth century more and more daringly rivalled the lordly palaces as hotbeds of philosophical novelties, Voltaireanism, Jacobinism, Hegelianism, socialism, godlessness, materialism, Parisian and London fashion, gaming, and licentiousness. The big city was a breach in the wall of the fortress of nationality, faith, the principles of morality and established customs – a menacing breach, particularly for a country that had been deprived of its national freedoms.

Thus, the indictment of the City was an aspect of a much broader process in which radical choices had to be made between nationality and cosmopolitanism, tradition and a overly hasty modernisation of life bringing morals, and customs in line with the Western patterns. Such an imposition and infiltration of cultural models and cardinal points creates a suggestive epistemic perspective – especially for a historian who wants to understand the arguments of both the prosecutors and the defenders.

The aptness of this perspective and any interpretation based on it should, however, be subjected to a comparative verification. We can attempt this by taking a look, as a counterpoint, into the literature of the country that was the first to experience this industrial and civilisational upheaval, the origins of that transition having been thoroughly indigenous. This country enjoyed the most capitalist agriculture, the largest and smokiest cities in the world, and was home to mechanics, free trade, and political economy.

There is probably no historian of Victorian culture who would challenge the observation that anti-urbanism and anti-industrialism were the predominant trends in English social thought throughout the nineteenth century, and that nostalgia for the withering, green, and serene old England stood out as the most characteristic motif in English literary output. As Raymond Williams observed, when searching for the moment the "old England" becomes a thing of the past and sinks into oblivion, one can endlessly shift backwards, beginning with our day.[72] "Old England" has simply always been dying, always the same benign, innocent, pastoral village around a venerable and tranquil country town or cathedral city, and it has always been the case that the new "old England" was never the same thing as its ancient counterpart. It is not our purpose here to trace the origins of this Arcadian myth, as this would lead us (so naturally) to Virgil and Theocritus. It is sufficient to remark that the myth has survived unspoiled the era of enclosures and the capitalist upheaval in English agriculture. One of the most brutal social operations known in the history of Europe left untouched the idyllic archetype of classical poetry of nature. It did happen to be bitterly derided at times – as in George Crabbe's 1783 poem *The Village*:

> Then shall I dare these real ills to hide
> In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?
>
> […]

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72 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 10–12.

> Here joyless roam a wild amphibious race,
> With sullen woe display'd in every face;
> Who, far from civil arts and social fly,
> And scowl at strangers with suspicious eye.[73]

Instances of sarcasm like this were rather rare, though. Even if hungry and depopulated, spitting out its paupers, the countryside remained an idyll in its literary representations, whereas the City was traditionally portrayed as a hotbed of all kinds of crime and artificiality occupying the pole of life opposite to Nature. True, the English Enlightenment, as any of its counterparts, was ambivalent in this respect as it glorified both Nature (whatever this lofty notion stood for) and the progress of civilisation. Let us, therefore, note – for the record – that in as early as around 1725, Daniel Defoe (as Stanisław Staszic almost a century later) was glad to see the weaving manufactures in the area of Halifax offering employment to so many – including children, aged four minimum – thus increasing both the population and welfare.[74] Let us remark that Samuel Johnson highly valued life in the capital city, where one could enjoy more freedom than in a provincial area and, moreover, benefit from stronger interpersonal relations thanks to the division of labour and exchange of its outcomes. A vagrant beggar in a civilised country, Johnson said in 1753, lives more comfortably and under safer living conditions than an Indian does. It is only within a civilised society that, having satisfied his primary needs, one can find time for intellectual entertainment and meditation.[75]

Yet, Dr. Johnson was in the minority. In the late nineteenth century, the population of the world's largest city was nearing one million. The Moloch was growing, to the amazement and fright of the whole of England. Historians tend to date the emergence of the industrial revolution at the 1760s – and the origins and early writings of Romanticism coincided exactly with it. Good-natured satires of a town of wastrels, thieves, and whores came to an end; the images and sounds of London, particularly London by night, became menacing and phantasmagorical

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73 *Poems by the Rev. George Crabbe* (Philadelphia: Bradford & Inskeep, 1808), pp. 5–6.

74 Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain (1724–1726)*, quoted after: Alasdair Clayre (ed.), *Nature and Industrialization. An Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 1–3.

75 Samuel Johnson, *The Adventurer*, 1753, quoted after: Clayre, (ed.), *Nature and Industrialization*, pp. 3–7.

as in William Blake's oft quoted poem, "And the hapless Soldiers sigh // Runs in blood down palace walls," – a hotbed of adversity, curse, and crime.[76]

The City triggers fear, the will to flee, a sense of oppression and impotency. It typifies vital energy – and death as well. A French scholar has collected metaphors used by English Romanticists to describe London; so, the city is a *goitre*, *tumour*, *gnarl*, or *polyp*; it is a *cage*, a *prison for the body and the soul*, a *desert*, *grave*, *mortuary*, and a *voracious monster*, a *funnel cloud*, a *whirl that sucks in*, a *volcano spitting hot lava*, a *fermenting tub*, an *ocean*, *sea full of sharks*, which swallows up its victims and casts them onto the shore, and finally, a *hell of the condemned*.[77]

In his *Letters from England*, 1807, Robert Southey thus describes the view from St. Paul's Cathedral tower:

> There had been nothing beautiful or sublime in the view; few objects, however, are so sublime, if by sublimity we understand that which completely fills the imagination to the utmost measure of its powers, as the view of a huge city thus seen at once. […] It was a sight which awed me and made me melancholy. I was looking down upon the habitations of a million of human beings; upon the single spot whereon were crowded together more wealth, more splendour, more ingenuity, more worldly wisdom, and, alas! more worldly blindness, poverty, depravity, dishonesty, and wretchedness, than upon any other spot in the whole habitable earth.[78]

And here is Birmingham by the same author – at the time not yet such a large industrial town:

> Every where around us, instead of the village church, whose steeple usually adorns so beautifully the English landscape, the tower of some manufactory was to be seen in the distance; vomiting up flames and smoke, and blasting every thing around with its metallic vapours. The vicinity was as thickly peopled as that of London. Instead of cottages we saw streets of brick hovels blackened with the smoke of coal fires, which burn day and night in these dismal regions.[79]

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76 William Blake, *London*, in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, London: William and Catherine Blake, 1789, no page numb.; Carl E. Schorske, "The Idea of the City in European Thought: Voltaire to Spengler" in Handlin, Oscar i Burchard, John (eds), *The Historian and the City*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 1963, p. 103.

77 Jean-Paul Hulin, *La Ville et les écrivains anglais 1770–1820*, diss., l'Université de Paris III (Lille 1978), pp. 383–390. [The words and phrases quoted here are retranslated from the French.]

78 Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella [Robert Southey], *Letters from England* (New York: George Dearborn, 1836), pp. 54–55. Cited after: Hulin, *La Ville*, p. 447.

79 Espriella, *Letters from England*, p. 73; quoted after: Hulin, *La Ville*, p. 461.

In hundreds of similar images, as Jean-Paul Hulin observes, there appears, as a general rule, a correspondence between the physical appearance and the moral climate of a town:

> This combination of the concrete and the abstract, of city's flesh and soul, shows that the city is increasingly perceived as a living entity, a collective being equipped with its own physiology [...] The city is growing, oftentimes like an outgrowth, it forages, defecates, vomits, proliferates (frequently in a perverse manner), gets infected with diseases [...] The city grumbles, clatters, ferments, pulsates, churns, breaks loose, roars, wakens, falls asleep, strives for death [...] Whilst the provinces and the countryside are deemed to represent quiescence, the persistence of tradition, a shelter for absolute values and *adamant beauty*, the city becomes a symbol of changeability: demographic and social mutations, ideological innovations, deformed taste, the perversion of customs and mores or of race, topographic changes, and political scheming. Anything that challenges the order, whether established or postulated, would trigger associations with city or be ascribed thereto.[80]

The world seen by the early-nineteenth-century English Romanticists shrank into the area of the British isle and expanded up to the limits of the cosmos. England fell apart in two, the cosmos was halved: on the one hand, the unbridled audacity of Reason, the mechanical orderliness of Newtonian physics, and on the other, a mystical union of man with Nature and God; discursive versus intuitive learning; the miraculous mechanics and control gained over the forces of nature versus the prodigy of poetry, the truly creative element that unveils the hidden order of the world. And further, utility and political economy are found on the one side, with beauty and moral law on the other; a landscape of death versus a landscape of life – both shrouded in the obscurity of mystery: a secret of dread and awe in the former case and a secret of alleviation and solace in the latter.

The fanatical William Blake opted for one of the sides of this cosmic struggle with all his heart and the magic of the word. The younger Romanticists, more at home with the trends of the age, mostly stood on guard witnessing the upset balance between the contradicting elements.

In his *Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley wrote: "we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave."[81] For what else, other than the

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80 Hulin, *La Ville*, pp. 399–400 [quoted as retranslated from the French].

81 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Defence of Poetry", in Clayre (ed.), *Nature and Industrialization*, p. 213. Cf. Maria Niemojowska, *Zapisy zmierzchu: symboliści angielscy i ich romantyczny rodowód*, Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1976, pp. 50–51.

disproportionate development of the mechanical crafts at the expense of spiritual creativity, could have caused the discoveries and inventions which were meant to relieve the toil of human labour to only add further burthen to the curse cast on Adam?

Wordsworth perceived London alternately as the loftiest spectacle and a cemetery of great human passions. His wanderer portrayed in *The Excursion* (1814) would openly admire populous cities sprouting in the wilderness, transoceanic vessels, and factories; he marvels at the might of the human mind which has breathed strength into dead and raw matter and dreams of the day when the power and the glory, founded upon moral law, will spread all over the globe. This same wanderer dreads that captive nature will someday wrathfully avenge its violated laws – to the bane of England.[82]

It is puzzling that the cautions of English poets and artists came ahead of the local development of industry and metropolitan agglomerations (apart from London); as a historian puts it, it was "as if the industrial revolution came on an aesthetic and philosophic world prepared for just the opposite at just that moment, for a return to nature, to solitude, and to simplicity."[83]

We could respond that it is a privilege of art to intuitively anticipate catastrophes, to figure things out beyond the limits of here and now. But did Romanticist art strive to anticipate things or, conversely, did it lag behind the changes? These categories are of no relevance here; it is not the old England clashing with a new one, or the peasant confronting the city and the machine. It is, rather, two archetypes of the human imagination, two never-reconciled longings, two sides of a torn human nature.

Wordsworth's wanderer watches the thousands of people – men, women, and children – hastening to offer their daily toil to the idol of profit:

Triumph who will in these profaner rites
Which we, a generation self-extolled,
As zealously perform! I cannot share
His proud complacency [...][84]

The self-extolled generation was not the workers hasting to work at the sound of a gong; they had no reason whatsoever to be proudly complacent. The description referred to a generation of ideologues, industrialists, engineers, and

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82 Hulin, *La Ville*, p. 21; Clayre (ed.), *Nature and Industrialization*, pp. 175–177.

83 Alasdair Clayre, Introduction to Clayre (ed.), *Nature and Industrialization*, p. XXIX.

84 William Wordsworth, "The Outrage Done to Nature", in Clayre (ed.), *Nature and Industrialization*, p. 177.

journalists – a generation that was only then entering the stage. Progress was their god, and Bentham was their prophet. It was a generation of philosophical and political radicals, one that swept up feudal and corporate laws, the generation that England owes its electoral reform act of 1832, the abolishment of the corn laws, equal rights to religions, and enthusiasm for science and industry – along the nightmarish workhouses for the indigent and the gospel of free trade.

Macaulay, gifted with a stirring style, a historian and one of the most popular authors in that age of reform, was a high priest of the cult of progress. His *History of England from the Accession of James II* and critical essays (1835, 1846) presented England as the greatest and the most highly civilised nation in world history, a nation that

> have spread their dominion over every quarter of the globe […] have created a maritime power which would annihilate in a quarter of an hour the navies of Tyre, Athens, Carthage, Venice, and Genoa together, have carried the science of healing, the means of locomotion and correspondence, every mechanical art, every manufacture, every thing that promotes the convenience of life, to a perfection which our ancestors would have thought magical.

There shall be no end to the progress of sciences and inventions: "In 1930 a far larger and wealthier population will be 'better fed, clad, and lodged' than in 1830, live longer and healthier lives in bigger cities, travel only by railroad and steam, and have 'machines constructed on principles yet undiscovered'".[85]

This prophecy, along with a thousand similar ones, reveals to us today a universal infirmity of the nineteenth-century futurology of European liberals, whose technological imagination enabled them to anticipate accurately but always too little, whilst their social and moral imagination always produced too much and, fundamentally erroneously. The foundation of this doctrine was a naïve connection between the intellectual, material, social, and moral aspects of progress. Andrew Ure, professor of chemistry and author of the famous *Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835), saw the factory of his time as a germ of the automation of the entire manufacturing process; as he noted, factory floors are more respectable than "monuments of Asiatic, Egyptian, and Roman despotism."

> Such is the factory system, replete with prodigies in mechanics and political economy, which promises, in its future growth, to become the great minister of civilization to the terraqueous globe, enabling this country, as its heart, to diffuse along with its commerce,

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85   Quoted after: Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830–1870*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 39–41.

the life-blood of science and religion to myriads of people still lying "in the region and shadow of death."[86]

This early Victorian optimism came to its climax in the middle of the century. In 1846 the Parliament abolished the Corn Laws, which marked a historical victory of the bourgeoisie. Two years later, however, Chartism was at the peak of its strength, and together with the rest of Europe, England stood on the edge of revolution, which was always imagined in a *sans-culotte* mould. It is not our point here to delve into whether England was eventually saved from revolutionary upheavals thanks to a specific arrangement of social forces differing from those the continent, or perhaps to the internal weaknesses of Chartist legalism, or perhaps to the determination of old Marshall Wellington, who deployed the troops at London's public edifices and other key points in a timely fashion, seeming not to be joking. Suffice it to say that the workers' movement fell apart with no earthquakes following, and the City remained free of threatening antagonists from the Left or Right for many years.

The 1851 the Great (and indeed gigantic) Exhibition of the works of industry and commerce "of all Nations," the first-ever such event, proved to be the largest of the pagan rites Wordsworth had anticipated. Hyde Park saw the erection of the world's largest greenhouse on that occasion: the Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton, a gardener by profession and a great manager and architect in practice. The Palace was visited by six million people from all over the world; historians wrote of it that it opened a vision of England as a land of glass houses and the Promised Land of free trade. The Machinery Court exhibits included miraculous inventions such as an American reaping machine, a Jacquard loom, a telegraph, and an alarm clock.

The main point behind this unprecedented project was, however, a moral message. The exhibition was to be a temple of creative work, Christianity, and eternal peace. All the British newspapers and journals portrayed the venture in this spirit; Prince Albert delivered his opening speech along these very lines.[87] Charles Kingsley, the novelist and publicist, one of the prime movers of the exhibition, so remarked in his sermon-like talk:

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86 Andrew Ure, "The Philosophy of Manufactures", in Clayre (ed.), *Nature and Industrialization*, p. 70.

87 J.A. Emerton, *A Moral and Religious Guide to the Great Exhibition*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851; Asa Briggs, *Victorian People. A Reassessment of Persons and Themes 1851–1867*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 23–59.

> If these forefathers of ours could rise from their graves this day they would be inclined to see in our hospitals, in our railroads, in the achievements of our physical science, confirmation of that old superstition of theirs, proofs of the kingdom of God, realisations of the gifts which Christ received for men, vaster than any of which they had dreamed.[88]

After reading hundreds of such texts in praise of the nineteenth century, can one say that the dreams of utilitarianists, evolutionists, and the "captains of industry" were more hard-headed and temperate than those of the Romanticists?

The liberal Victorian utopia, making use of the Bible and statistics annuals, Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* and Samuel Smiles' guidebooks for self-made men, differed from other dreams in that it placed itself in linear time, in close reach of the future. Interestingly, however, the city – a real city populated by real people – is nearly absent in this utopia.

It is no wonder that in the middle of the century machines were England's centrepiece, while cities were its shame, to put it bluntly. While the ethos of acquisitive capitalism appeared life-giving for the development of technologies, industries, and commerce, it proved death-dealing to the social environment of humans. Progress was disclosing its Janus-faced nature. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote after his visit to Manchester in 1835:

> Everything in the exterior appearance of the city attests the individual power of man; nothing the directing power of society. At every turn human liberty shows its capricious creative force. There is no trace of the slow continuous action of government. […] Here the weakness of the individual seems more feeble and helpless even than in the middle of a wilderness. From this foul drain the greatest steam of human industry flows out to fertilise the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles, and civilised man is turned back almost into a savage.[89]

These proliferating preserves of feral civilisation – Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Preston, or London's East End – became the prime material evidence in the great trial against the City argued by English literature since the century's beginning. The charges extended to utilitarianist ethics, Manchesterian economy, the Whig policies, commercial statistics, and engineering. The social criticism of capitalism – conservative and radical on equal footing, both full of whistle-blowing fury – initially borrowed its vocabulary and symbolism from Romanticist poets, but brought them down to street level, saturating them

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88 Quoted after: Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 43.
89 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, trans. George Lawrence and K.P. Mayer, ed. J.P. Mayer, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958, pp. 105–108.

with journalistic detail. It was William Cobbett, the greatest populist demagogue England has ever produced, who indelibly introduced the word *Wen* (cancerous growth, craw, or goitre) into the common discourse when describing London or Manchester.[90]

The civilisation of factory and city appeared as the destruction of human communities, the atomisation of society, leaving the bereft individual prey to sharks. It stood for poisoning of the natural and moral environment, disorderliness in mores and morals, humans deprived of autonomy and dignity. Not many would realise today that the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* borrowed images, recognitions, and clichés from British social criticism of the first half of the century, with which Friedrich Engels was definitely well acquainted having written *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

The figure of Thomas Carlyle soars over this epoch. Although not quite readable today owing to his bombastic style, his work offered an almost complete and ready-to-use array of antibourgeois rhetoric and certainly exerted a profound impact on the climate of Victorian thought. Yet, Carlyle has nothing in common with the sentimental idyll or rustic atmosphere, passeistic utopia, or the Lake Poets. His volcanic romanticism, spewing lava flows of words, is neither rightist nor leftist. It challenges any ideological classification whilst affirming human grandeur, the audacity of design, thought, and imagination, which can be expressed in the form of a Gothic cathedral or, no less so, a steam engine. Here is Carlyle's Manchester – let us compare it with the description from above:

> Prospero evoked the singing of Ariel, and took captive the world with those melodies: the same Prospero can send his Fire-demons panting across all oceans; shooting with the speed of meteors, on cunning highways, from end to end of kingdoms; and make Iron his missionary, preaching *its* [italics original] evangel to the brute Primeval Powers, which listen and obey: neither is this small. Manchester, with its cotton-fuz, its smoke and dust, its tumult and contentious squalor, is hideous to thee?[…] Hast thou heard, with sound ears, the awakening of a Manchester, on Monday morning, at half-past five by the clock; the rushing-off of its thousand mills, like the boom of an Atlantic tide, ten thousand times ten thousand spools and spindles all set humming there, – it is perhaps, if thou knew it well, sublime as a Niagara, or more so. Cotton-spinning is the clothing of the naked in its result; the triumph of man over matter in its means. Soot and despair are not the essence of it; they are divisible from it, – at this hour, are they not crying fiercely to be divided?[91]

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90 Theo Barker (ed.), *The Long March of Everyman 1750–1960*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 84–85; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979, pp. 31–39.

91 Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism*, London: James Fraser, 1840, pp. 83–84.

But do not confuse this paean with the liberals' hymns in praise of free trade and eternal peace. True, Carlyle finds every machine sublime; he describes his first trip by train in 1839 as "the likest thing to a Faust's flight on the Devil's mantle."[92] Physical labour and engineering is a sacrament (God and Devil sharing a common sacred space), but industrialism is a wicked civilisation in its tawdriness, and the Mechanical Age is a degraded age, the city remains enswathed in soot and despair. England is dying of emaciation amidst its countless riches. Two million jobless, numb, and mute people are living in workhouses where there is no work for them. Scotland does not even have workhouses. Glasgow is a Dantean hell; nowhere on Earth is there such hopelessness.

The unbridled expansion of Mechanism is the cause of this. Education, religion, science and learning, philosophy, politics, economy, and administration have all grown mechanical; the actions of humans have become mechanical, as well as their feelings and thoughts, all subservient to one rhythm. "Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand." Morality and public opinion are mechanical too. In cultivating Mechanics, Dynamics was neglected – the knowledge that refers to man's elementary forces and energy, to the secret mainsprings of love, fear, admiration, enthusiasm, poetry, and faith rather than to "motives" comprehended as awaiting a reward or fearing a punishment, or as a calculation of benefits and losses. The Mechanics vs. Dynamics opposition proposed by Carlyle is different than the better-known contradistinction of mechanical and organic society. The mechanical world is outward, practical, and material; the dynamic world is inward – a world of human spirit and genius. The balance between them must be restored.[93]

For the time being, Carlyle states, England is mired in Mechanism, in externality; its spiritual grandness has been hogtied by Benthamite accountants of happiness, and society has unraveled; uprooted and amidst the crowd, man has become a remote-controlled automaton. What about the City, then? The city is undermined by *sans-culottism*. For half of his life, Carlyle studied the French Revolution which both fascinated him and left him awestricken – a reaction typical to an Englishman. So the *sans-culotte* revolution has not come to an end; it lives on in the bowels of the hungry masses of labourers and is about to explode like a volcano, a hurricane, a flood, or a fire that will consume all the party games, parliamentary reforms and economic calculations, and will engulf traditions,

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92 Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, p. 25.
93 Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', in Alan Shelston, ed., *Carlyle's Selected Writings*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 61–85.

ideals, and convictions until the mighty will of a Hero, aware of the magical power of command, harnesses the element of chaos and creates the underpinnings and rudiments of a moral order of the world.[94] Industrial society, which was only just emerging out of the English fog in the mid-nineteenth century, like the locomotive in the Turner's painting of genius, *Rain, Steam, and Speed*, called for – as Carlyle believed – not liberalism or a mean economy of interest, but rather, a monastic or military discipline to serve the spiritual purposes of collective work and effort. As with Saint-Simon, such moral discipline can only be superimposed by some *captains of industry* who would take the lead of a society formed into an army of labour – this being the only way to prevent an outbreak of *sans-culottism*.

Influenced to an extent by Carlyle's vivid and evocative social criticism, but without its metaphysical aspect or the idea of regimentation of labour, the English mid-nineteenth-century industrial novel saw a development – marked with the names of Disraeli, Elisabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and, first and foremost, Charles Dickens. Coketown, portrayed by the last of these writers in *Hard Times* (1854), and modelled after Preston, became a symbolic city for the remainder of the Victorian period, a par excellence industrial town. This stereotyping process came all the easier as *Hard Times* is a didactic and satirical novel, to whose ideological assumptions the writer's talent for social and psychological observation was in this particular case subjected. The sensual impressions certainly stem from the author's observations: the stench of factory vapours and fumes eddying through the novel's pages; the never-ending clatter of steam engines, with nowhere to hide from it; the monotony of identical red-brick streets; steady rains and mist mixed with smoke; the mind-numbing rhythm of everyday life. More stereotypical is a vitalisation of the machine, a piston that "worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness."[95] This *elephant* is part of the history of literature.

But it was not the machine, or factory, or some coke town – or even the grotesquely atrophied bourgeoisie – that formed the actual subject of indictment. It was the utilitarian philosophy and ethics that, in Dickens's belief, had originally formed and sanctioned, or legitimised, the system of pervasive Mechanism and reification; a mechanical education, mechanical statistics, a mechanical

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94 Williams, *Culture and Society*, pp. 85–96; Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832–1867*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1977, pp. 61–76.

95 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times and Reprinted Pieces*, London: Chapman & Hall, Ltd, and New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905, p. 18.

Parliament with its mechanical reforms, and a mechanical class struggle. The demonised Bentham, Ricardo, Cobden, and even John Stuart Mill are the law-makers of Coketown which stands for England. The mechanised minds of book-keepers created that big devilish wheel – as if taken from Blake's apocalyptic mythology – a mill of the callous rationalism personified by Mr Gradgrind in the novel. It is a mill that grinds human fortunes and crushes the personality and privacy of those caught on the conveyor belts of its industrial machinery.

There is no social force whatsoever in Dickens that would be able to resist the Coketown mechanism; the grotesque labour unions governed by demagogues belong to this same dead world. The only hope is human spontaneity which has not yet been fully crushed; the joy of useless arts and disinterested entertainment, daydream and fable, love and natural goodness and kind-heartedness. In *Hard Times*, the wandering troupe of circus artists is symbolic of such spontaneity, the only people not yet sucked into the stony world of the City. The eternal antinomy between City and Nature is preserved in Dickens, but Nature no longer seeks shelter in the countryside or in the woods, but in the hearts of ordinary people:

> A special contrast, as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked, to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he laboured. Never fear, good people […] that Art will consign Nature to oblivion. Set anywhere, side by side, the work of God and the work of man; and the former, even though it be a troop of Hands of very small account, will gain in dignity from the comparison.[96]

Hard Times, in my opinion one of Dickens' artistically weaker works, became a prototype of all the urban portrayals of *jungles* or *promised lands*, as well as of the dark visions of a new world where human spontaneity is infallibly overwhelmed and smashed by the System, the Law, and by the unconceivable, soulless "rules of the game." Nevertheless, Dickens wrote his novel at the very time when crowds, fascinated by the technological novelties and the splendour of Britain, poured into the Crystal Palace. And, it was roughly at the same time that Henry Mayhew had completed his research trips to the indigent districts of London, "of whom the public had less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth," as he remarked in the foreword to his famous book.[97] He then decided to take off into

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96 Dickens, *Hard Times*, p. 54; Williams, *The Country and the City*, pp. 156–162; Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, pp. 60–75.

97 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor. A Cyclopedia of the Conditions and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, And Those That Will Not Work*, Vol. 1, London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1861, p. 1.

the sky in a balloon to look down at that measureless "leviathan Metropolis," that "monster city," which allowed him

> to contemplate from afar that strange conglomeration of vice, avarice, and low cunning, of noble aspirations and humble heroism, and to grasp it in the eye, in all its incongruous integrity, at one single glance – to take, as it were, an angel's view of that huge town where, perhaps, there is more virtue and more iniquity, more wealth and more want, brought together into one dense focus than in any other part of the earth – to hear the hubbub of the restless sea of life and emotion below, and hear it, like the ocean in a shell, whispering of the incessant strugglings and chafings of the distant tide.[98]

Is this not almost identical to the above-cited description by Southey, who had viewed London from St. Paul's Cathedral tower?

This is how, by the middle of the century, all the basic contradictions that would fuel Victorian and Edwardian English culture had been already knotted and articulated: the opposition between the ethics of competition and the ethics of community, between mechanism and organism, between utility and selfless beauty, technology and nature, the urban and the rural, science and poetry, anarchy and culture (following Matthew Arnold's concept); between accumulation of wealth and quality of life, "dashing" or "being" (after Ruskin); between "how things work" and "what things mean"; and finally, between thought oriented toward learning and conquest of the world and thought focused on (re)cognising one's self. All of England's great energy was directed towards competition, mechanism, utility, technology, the city, science, and expansion. All of England's great literature was directed towards giving voice to the longings, fears, dreams, and sentiments repressed in real life, it took the side of community, organicity, beauty, nature, the countryside, poetry, and the heart, or tried to endure this duality of historical existence, the human condition, the tear of the inflexible longings that afflict modern civilisation. The experience of England from the times of its primacy is of universal significance in this respect.

In his famous lecture delivered at Cambridge in 1959, Charles Percy Snow, physicist and writer, spoke of that tear, so characteristic to England – the lack of a common language between the two types of education, between the culture of the scientific and industrial revolution and literary and philosophical culture. He referred to British intellectuals as "natural Luddites" who since the Romanticist age had only seen *horror* in machinery, the metropolis, and the pragmatism of scientific rationality, whilst they were unwilling to see the positive influence

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98 Henry Mayhew, *John Binny, The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life*, London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1862, p. 9.

of these upheavals on the social situation of man or the fact that modern industry offers the only chance for a world of poverty and backwardness. They were stubbornly hanging on to the myth of a happy pre-industrial England and the blissfulness of rustic life and practiced the aristocratic ideal, as cultivated until recently at Oxford and Cambridge, of disinterested culture and knowledge without application. Yet, Snow spared no criticism toward the other party either, for his goal was to bare the biased nature of both and bring about a dialogue between, if not ultimately an integration of, these two cultures.[99]

A similar, though much more partial assumption was made by the historian Martin Wiener. His book, meaningfully entitled *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, unleashed a turbulent debate. Written in the early years of Margaret Thatcher's period in power by one of her ardent followers, the book is an erudite monograph written in a pamphlet-like virulent style. This American author told the English that they should seek the reasons for Britain's weakening economy which was lagging behind the United States, Japan, and Germany and for the decay of the labour ethos in their own social and literary traditions. Wiener namely observed that English culture since the mid-nineteenth century has, in its entirety, been infected with a distaste for commerce, a disinclination to industry, a disgust for things urban, and rustic snobbery; even the industrial bourgeoisie climbed up the social ladder merely in order to become gentrified as soon as practicable and to live their gentlemen-of-leisure lives at their country homes.[100] This would even sound convincing – if not for the fact that a no less abundant dossier of anti-industrial ideology and anti-urban literature was at the disposition of readers in the United States as well[101] – a country that witnessed no such economic slippage.

But once we return from our excursion to London and Manchester back to Warsaw and Lodz, visiting our classicists and romanticists, conservatives and

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99   Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures: And A Second Book*, New York: The New American Library, 1963, pp. 9–52.

100   Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992; cf. Jean-Paul Hulin, "'Rus in urbe': a key to Victorian anti-urbanism?", in Jean-Paul Hulin and Pierre Coustillas (eds.), *Victorian Writers and the City*, Lille: Publ. de l'Université de Lille III, 1979, pp. 11–18.

101   Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1962; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964; and others.

revolutionaries, modernists and anti-modernists, then what readily stands out is the derivative, unoriginal, and – one might say – plagiaristic quality of the Polish case against the city and bourgeois-industrial civilisation. Their arguments seem to be a faded copy of the accusatorial harangues of Coleridge, Carlyle, Ruskin, or Morris. Still, the Polish arguments did attain an additional dimension, unknown to the Western authors, namely the geographical aspect. The political and cultural geography contributed to the axiology. Machine and City, rationalism and materialism, capitalism and socialism were, as a matter of fact, products of the *West*, whilst protection against them had been raised to the rank of nationality against cosmopolitanism and things foreign. The *promised land*, pulsing with the rhythm of machinery and tempting with its mirage of success, turned out to be a Jewish-German land, one that demoralised the Polish soul. And with this, Polish literature and social discourse produced their only original and familiar trait: the Polish peasant. Folk culture was virtually unknown to nineteenth-century England. Juxtaposed against the city, the English countryside mostly consisted of residential country homes, rather than rough peasant huts. Gardens and meadows, rather than rows of rye, potatoes, and beetroots, were envisioned in the English opposition to Metropolis and Machine. In Poland, we find this ideal in the poetry of Krasicki and Trembecki, and indeed, even in Aleksander Fredro's comedies. But this was no longer the case with the novels of Prus or Reymont. At that point, the ideology of Slavonic indigenousness and the myth of native culture came to be attached to the figure of peasant.

All the rest is a copy rather than an original. If you have read the English authors, the philosophical treatises of Russian, Polish, Czech, or Serbian Slavophiles, ideologists of tradition, eulogisers of the landed gentry, defenders of the rural, enemies of the stock exchange and liberal economy appear almost to be translations from foreign languages. Which is not to say that they were actual imitations, although such influence is beyond controversy. What it means is that Russian and Polish, Hungarian and Serbian thought and literature, even in the preindustrial period, were a part of Europe. Ideas move around faster than institutions or landscapes do. A peasant's sense of alienation in the city streets, his dismay at the clamour and brutality of the metropolis, the trauma of adaptation, the fears of agrarian or underdeveloped countries facing the levelling forces of capitalism – these hypotheses explain anti-urban sentiments only to a slight degree. Such sentiments would not diminish as towns and industry developed; on the contrary, they would intensify. The bourgeois intelligentsia, born into an urban environment, brought up and educated in urban milieus, produced no less passionate criticisms of modern civilisation than the exiles from rural areas.

The conflict between the lure of the City and the desire to escape to the Countryside in real life and in literature alike would therefore personify the contradictory emotions aroused in us by the world as it exists and is transformed for the use of our successors.[102] These two poles are two faces of one civilisation, perpetually split and torn, one that has always and in every single period announced a crisis of values, fearing its own triumphs, and repeatedly prophesying its own annihilation. It is both great and horrifying, a human and daemonic civilisation of a sorcerer's terrified apprentices.

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102   Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 26.

Chapter 4. Degeneration, the English Way

Victorian Critics of Culture

John Stuart Mill vividly portrayed two facets of civilisation in his essay on Coleridge (1838):

> One observer is forcibly struck by the multiplication of physical comforts; the advancement and diffusion of knowledge; the decay of superstition; the facilities of mutual intercourse; the softening of manners; the decline of war and personal conflict; the progressive limitation of the tyranny of the strong over the weak; the great works accomplished throughout the globe by the co-operation of multitudes: and he becomes that very common character, the worshipper of "our enlightened age." Another fixes his attention, not upon the value of these advantages, but upon the high price which is paid for them; the relaxation of individual energy and courage; the loss of proud and self-relying independence; the slavery of so large a portion of mankind to artificial wants; their effeminate shrinking from even the shadow of pain; the dull, unexciting monotony of their lives, and the passionless insipidity, and absence of any marked individuality, in their characters; the contrast between the narrow mechanical understanding, produced by a life spent in executing by fixed rules a fixed task, and the varied powers of the man of the woods, whose subsistence and safety depend at each instant upon his capacity of extemporarily adapting means to ends; the demoralizing effect of great inequalities in wealth and social rank; and the sufferings of the great mass of the people of civilized countries, whose wants are scarcely better provided for than those of the savage, while they are bound by a thousand fetters in lieu of the freedom and excitement which are his compensations.[103]

This is a peculiar antithesis, whose positive side (naïve in its utopianism as it is) seems to be repeating the early Victorian hackneyed rhetoric, and whose negative aspect – although echoing a distant Rousseauism – clearly bears the imprint of the personal experience of a philosopher who was strongly affected by the yoke of social conformities. Mill's intention was to highlight the consistencies between the two views, each of which renders only "half of the truth," and which are advantageously combinable, similarly as Bentham's rationalistic utilitarianism would be enriched if it quit its doctrinarianism and merged with Coleridge's conservative romanticist stance. In his penetrating critique of Mill's essays, Raymond Williams is doubtlessly right when he says that such a design could not be successful, and that the very arguments of the enthusiasts and critics of

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103   John Stuart Mill, "Coleridge", in *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Historical*, Vol. 2, Boston: William V. Spencer, 1865, p. 12.

Civilisation were not presented in the most pertinent fashion.[104] Importantly, however, with his incomparable ear for philosophical argument, Mill understood well the significance of this cleavage of values which had left a long unhealed wound in human history – the split between *culture* and *civilisation*.

We know that the clear differentiation between these two categories came from Germany,[105] and it was through the influence of German Romanticism on Coleridge and Carlyle that they found a place in the English language and vocabulary of ideas. *Civilisation* became the concept describing the external, material condition of society: its cities, institutions, technologies and techniques, customs and morals. *Cultivation*, or its derivative *culture*, was meant to be the lofty ideal of the spiritual elite: the heritage of centuries, and a somewhat narcissistic striving for perfection and beauty, guarded and tended by them.[106] Samuel Coleridge called for an elite class, endowed by the state, to be the custodians of culture. With the coined name *clerisy*, this class was meant to be – in a critical reference to the Anglican tradition – a synthesis of the clergy and the elite of the arts and sciences.[107]

Coleridge recognised that the continuity of civilisation is the foundation of a nation's longevity, and of its progress, freedom and liberty. "But civilization," he added, "is itself but a mixed good, if not far more a corrupting influence, the hectic of disease, not the bloom of health, and a nation so distinguished more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people, where this civilization is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity."[108]

The idea of culture thus sublimed, which in Coleridge's concept is entwined in the Romanticist philosophy of intuition, would take on a life of its own, prone to multiple transformations but always situated in opposition to anything that is perishable, *mechanical*, and trivial. Carlyle saw in this the rationale for the

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104   Williams, *Culture and Society*, pp. 66–67.

105   Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Oxford, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1995, pp. 3–9.

106   Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 48–50, 78–82.

107   For more on this topic, see Ben Knight, *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2010; cf. also Thomas W. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England*, London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982, pp. 66–67.

108   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State According to the Idea of Each*, London: William Pickering, 1839, p. 46.

existence of some dreamed-for spiritual aristocracy, a secular church, or a government of Men of Letters or Men of Intellect, who would reinstate organisation, faith, and moral order to the stunted world of mechanical routine and calculation, a world poisoned with eighteenth-century scepticism.[109] For Mill, it was important to complement eighteenth-century rationalist philosophy with what its *coryphaei* never managed to comprehend: the knowledge of the feelings and incentives that affect and propel people and nations. It was the reactionary *Germano-Coleridgean* school that created a sound philosophy of history and philosophy of culture, Mills tells us. It is thanks to those great writers, from Herder to Michelet, that history – until then, as in Shakespeare's tragedy, *a tale told by an idiot* – has become comprehensible and foreseeable. Authors such as Coleridge have enabled one to understand the sense and meaning of the beliefs and institutions of yore; hence, all the enlightened liberals and radicals ought to rejoice in having a conservative like him. Similarly to the British Constitution, civilisation is devised to mutually balance the forces of tradition and progress, rather than to try to intensify or exacerbate either of them.[110]

Thus, the concept of culture entered British life and the English language as a conservative idea, which should not, however, be reflected on a map of political factions, as culture kept very much away from politics. As it will turn out, it would enter into alliances with socially radical orientations, for culture was an idea of the romantic protest against the mediocre and a reality stripped of value, and against the reduction of mankind to a conglomerate of *useful virtues*.

For the time being, however, the exuberant mechanics and inventors, industrial and railway entrepreneurs, supported by the financial hub – the City – made little of Mill's ideal balance, escalating, together with their own gains and social importance, irreversible changes in the English landscape; still, they would not disavow elevated and poetical justifications for their historical mission – as shown by the Great Exhibition. In the mid-century, nearly every single day confirmed their right to satisfaction. The threat of dramatic social conflict was averted as the Chartist movement collapsed. British capitalism was developing propitiously, and Queen Victoria's Empire was in its best years. Scientists were discovering the secrets of Nature and the mysteries of the prehistory of mankind, one after the other. The optimistic idea of the objective and unstoppable progress of the human race found its way into people's minds as an almost apparent

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109   Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Man of Letters", in Shelston (ed.), *Carlyle's Selected Writings*, pp. 235–256; Williams, *Culture and Society*, pp. 96–97.

110   Mill, *Coleridge*, pp. 6–78.

truth, particularly when the enthusiasm for science and technology coincided with admiration for the English genius of inventiveness, technology, and commerce, as well as with recognition of the British civilisational mission. History appeared a process subject to laws, restricted and oriented, as in Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* – a book that taught young progressives, including Polish ones, the ABCs of the positive method. Political and intellectual history recounted modern history as a continual, but ultimately victorious, struggle of the light of reason with the gloom of superstition; this is quite well rendered in the title of William Lecky's work *The Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Nationalism in Europe* (1865). Increasing rationality would obviously bring man greater freedom, which was evermore efficiently, though still not ideally, guaranteed by British constitutional law.[111]

When laying the fundamentals of his tremendous synthesis of all sciences in the 1850s, Herbert Spencer, the great autodidact, extended the law of progress to the entire history and prehistory of human communities and societies; yet, he was hesitant about whether a specified purpose – namely, the happiness of mankind – could be ascribable to this law. Analogously to the evolution of forms in nature, the progress of civilisation is reflected in the increasing specialisation and diversity of authorities, institutions, social classes, customs and morals, skills, learning and knowledge, functions, languages, and arts – such that in all the domains of life there emerges ever greater diversity, a "multiplication of effects," and their mutual adaptation. Take the construction and operation of railroads, for instance: what chains of unanticipated changes have been triggered by this development! How many new ideas have their way paved by every single scientific discovery! The only limit of knowledge is the ultimate mystery of life; we learn "at once the greatness and the littleness of human intellect — its power in dealing with all that comes within the range of experience; its impotence in dealing with all that transcends experience."[112]

To what extent these great panoramas and theories of human history were *per se* a source of optimism, and to what extent they were, rather, a secondary rationalisation and fixture of a spontaneous fascination with modern times cannot of course be determined. Suffice it to say that within such a global perspective, individual events of the time, at least those as unpleasant as the mutiny of Indian sepoys, could be ranked as merely episodic unless they could be made to fit the

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111   Peter J. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past*, Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989, pp. 5–7, 17–29.

112   Herbert Spencer, "Progress, its Law and Cause", in *Essays: Scientific, Political, & Speculative*, Vol. 1, London, Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1891, pp. 8–62.

picture of progressive liberty, such as the war against Russia or the abolition of slavery in America.

And yet during that same time, which historians seem to agree was the apogee of Victorian optimism and trust in the spirit of modernity, an aversion towards what such modernity might bring could not be eradicated, even if it had quieted down. Characteristically, literature offered shelter to these anxieties and gave them voice. This reluctance cannot possibly be seen as an attribute of political and social conservatism. Dickens, who painted the dreary pictures of the middle class's liberal hypocrisy, was no conservative, after all, nor was Mill, who perceived liberty of thought as a property incessantly threatened by the terror of public opinion, eager as it was to impose the norms of its mediocrity on everyone else, rather than a ripe fruit from the tree of progress. Benjamin Disraeli was a Tory in his younger years, albeit an extraordinary one indeed. His *Sybil; or, the Two Nations* (1845) gave vent to his distaste for the intensifying vulgarity of English politics and the reigning "spirit of rapacious covetousness, desecrating all the humanities of life." All that notorious progress is destructive to human bonds, and competitiveness kills the sense of community: "Christianity teaches us to love our neighbour as ourself; modern society acknowledges no neighbour" – a Chartist says in *Sybil*.[113]

The most sensitive English writers of the mid-century, George Eliot first among them, shared a keen sense of the trivialisation of bourgeois culture, its disregard for traditional ideals, the nobility of emotions, and the solemnity of history.[114] Regardless of any hope a writer of the period may have had for social reforms, the metaphor of industrial England commonly featured grey landscapes of wasteland, or wilderness.[115] Like never before, the people of that era shared a feeling that this world was rushing forward, and even the most outstanding individual could only to a negligible extent control the direction of the current which was carrying him or her along. In the face of the mighty powers setting human masses in motion, no enlightened opinion, no idea for reform, and no higher values have a chance to break through and influence minds or the course of events. The time of heroism, great individualities, and disinterested virtues has come to an end.

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113   Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil; or, The Two Nations*, Vol. 1, London: Henry Colburn, Publisher, 1845, pp. 69, 148.

114   George Eliot, *Debasing the Moral Currency*; cf. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, pp. 300–301.

115   Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform*, pp. 141, 183, 223.

It is important that we resume now the train of Mill's argument, who in his 1836 essay, *Civilization*, presented one of the earliest diagnoses of the state of culture in an epoch of the mass dissemination of things and ideas. For Mill, it was doubtless that the development of education and national wealth contributed to the eradication of crude superstitions and, to a degree, the softening of feelings and emotions, but that same development had triggered the need for the constant solicitation of the public's attention in order to palm merchandise or an opinion off onto them – their value being completely irrelevant. "This is a reading age; and, precisely because it is so reading an age, any book which is the result of profound meditation is perhaps less likely to be duly and profitably read than at a former period. […] The world, in consequence, gorges itself with intellectual food; and, in order to swallow the more, *bolts* [italics original] it. Nothing is now read slowly, or twice over. Books are run through with no less rapidity, and scarcely leave a more durable impression, than a newspaper article." A writer's activity is generally growing similar to journalistic writing, since the opinion is informed not by those who can write wisely but those who write frequently. Consequently, "literature becomes more and more a mere reflection of the current sentiments, and has almost entirely abandoned its mission as an enlightener and improver of them."[116] The only way to prevent this, Mill advised, was to counterweight the force of emulation with the power of acting conjointly, no less in the cultural market than in the trading of commodities: "Such a spirit of co-operation is most of all wanted among the intellectual classes and professions." Literature, in particular, is the province where the character of the future ages is formed – to a greater extent than the buyers who are chasing whatever is being advertised and selling well in the book market can possibly imagine. "The time is perhaps coming, when authors, as a collective guild, will be their own patrons and their own booksellers."[117]

Mill's article was ahead of its time, and the role of the "intellectual classes," the defence of higher culture against its trivialisation and commercialisation, have ever since become a never-ending concern for leading English thinkers. It was their recognised privilege to castigate society and its institutions – and indeed, Cobbett and Carlyle, Dickens, and Mill all enjoyed this privilege, each in his specific style. Their moral authority remained considerable, whereas the hypocrisy

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116 John Stuart Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Historical*, Vol. 1, Boston: William V. Spencer, 1865, pp. 211–213.

117 Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions*, pp. 215–218.

that masked the ruthless struggle of competing interests appeared to all of them as a symptom of social degradation.[118]

Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) ought to be seen in this context. Read today, particularly without realising its original context, the book seems elevated but also rhetorical and tame, and yet, it is still recognised as one of the most important declarations in the English nineteenth-century social discourse. The influential literary critic, an Inspector of Schools for many years, a religious thinker, and reflexive poet was appalled by the crudeness and provincialism of English society and the egoism affecting all its classes and churches. The fever of the street demonstrations in London, the rallies and party struggles which preceded the electoral reform of 1867, not to mention the Fenians or the anti-Catholic riots, gave him a taste of democracy as a political bazaar where any public authority disappears from sight. The English nation does not exist, since there are no binding values or respect for the State as a common good. There is, instead, a state of spiritual *anarchy* in a liberal society governed by aristocratic *barbarians* alongside bourgeois *philistines*, in the future, perhaps, to be ruled by *Jacobins* swaying the emotions of the *mob*.

The only glue to bond society and salvation from spiritual meanness and dissention could be found in *Culture*, understood in the Coleridgean sense as striving for self-perfection and improving the world by drawing from the treasure-house of immortal thoughts and books that the human race has created. The revival would be brought about through a synthesis of *Hebraism* and *Hellenism*, that is, strict obedience to the Law of God, with a joyous freedom of creativity and appreciation of beauty. Thus sanctified, culture would not stand against concerns for wellbeing, industry, the body, and freedom – always considering them means, rather than actual purposes, of life. It would, however, object to a *mechanical civilisation* which reduces everything into soulless and unfeeling machinery. Culture renounces hatred, strives for a State that would not be torn by social class interests, for one that incarnates its collective best self, the best of its citizens' self, a State standing guard over governance and order, the master of public education and promoter of great changes.

As can be easily seen, this was nothing of a liberal programme. A classless State, driven by the light of *righteous reason* by an *aristocracy of talent and character*, would have to retain authority, Arnold believed, as the guardian of both

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118 Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, pp. 101, 424–425; for a broader discussion on the authority and the role of intellectuals, see Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

law and order and spiritual values. Based on normative, rather than descriptive content, a sublime idea of culture would serve as an ideal pattern for the evaluation of middle-class civilisation, with its canon of utilitarianism and, in Arnold's view, its asocial concept of liberty, of merely *doing as one likes*.[119]

Probably nowhere in Europe was the bourgeoisie able to secure the goodwill of local writers for any length of time. No other social class, with its mentality, morals, and tastes, was as often exposed to the angry criticism and scornful mockery of men of letters and moralists. In England, this enmity surfaced, perforce, at a rather early stage, as was mentioned in the previous essay. Interestingly, Britain's economic successes, the international expansion of British commodities, the power of the Empire, the impressive achievements of science and technology, and even the relative improvement over the years in the situation of the working class failed to suppress the antipathy of the creators of culture towards the creators of industry and trade.[120]

This distaste took on a concentrated form in the abundant creative output of John Ruskin, that quick-tempered loner whose powerful individuality weighed on the climate of English intellectual life of the century's latter half to an extent comparable perhaps only to Carlyle's impact a generation earlier. A historian of art, a radical critic of industrialism, political economy, and bourgeois culture, an author whose rhetoric, suggestive persuasion, and rich imagery were thrilling, Ruskin associated and combined ethical and aesthetic arguments. There is no greater moral crime one could commit, he argued, than denying somebody's joy of labour, inseparable as it is from the creative nature of work. Consequently, the evil of capitalism, its very essence, one might say, consists not so much in the economic exploitation of workers but mainly in a denial of their dignity, their degradation to a piece of machinery. Ruskin thus refreshes this old thread of romanticist critique, making it the primary argument of his own social philosophy.

For Ruskin, the ideal of unrestrained creativity and craft was Gothic architecture, always bearing unique individual characteristics, even if at times roughly finished. In striving for a mathematical excellence of form, the Renaissance – or, as a broader concept, Classicism – had deprived the builders and masons of the licence and spontaneous joy of creation, which was apparently the reason for

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119 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: an Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869. Cf. also Williams, *Culture and Society*, pp. 124–135; Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform*, pp. 237–238.

120 Richard Howard Stafford Crossman, "The Testament of Change", in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians: An Historic Revaluation of the Victorian Age*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966, p. 425.

the decline of art in Europe. Hence, the neo-Gothic style, which – not without Ruskin's influence – was taking precedence over Classicism in historicising English architecture during the latter half of the nineteenth century, was intentionally meant also to reinstate that lost bond between man and the products of his labour.[121] In any case, the industrial era, through the division of labour and mechanical multiplication of patterns, has killed the sense of the purposefulness of labour and, furthermore, it "delights itself in the defilement and degradation of all the best gifts of its God."[122] The industrial division of labour meant, precisely, a division of human beings into segments, which is reinforced and justified by the "bastard science" of economy which reduces the richness of human nature to a single primitive motive of doing, and has based its entire *system* upon it. It is as if people were driven by nothing other than the need to make money, business, and the greed for gain, and not by personal dignity, honour, joy of life, or aesthetics![123]

The horrors of the mechanisation of life, the defeat of improvisation by calculation, and the relinquishing of human freedom to the sway of scientific determinism – these fears of philosophers and poets were too persistent for us to disregard them. Many of them perceived the machine not as merely a practical appliance used to transform work, but as a symbol of dehumanisation and bondage, a destroyer of the natural rhythms of the world. In the view of Ruskin, a social radical rather than a conservative, the industrial invasion was a darkness embracing and seizing the world: "All England may, if it so chooses, become one manufacturing town; and Englishmen […] may live diminished lives in the midst of noise, of darkness, and of deadly exhalation. But the world cannot become a factory, nor a mine. No amount of ingenuity will ever make iron digestible by the million, nor substitute hydrogen for wine."[124]

The destruction of landscape and greenery, which had already become a fact in England, the pollution of the air and poisoning of the rivers, the neglect of everything that cannot readily be useful or yield a benefit, and finally, the ugliness of factory-made goods, towns, and houses – all of that would destroy any sense of liberty and beauty in those brought up in such an environment.

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121 John Ruskin, "The Nature of Gothic", in: *The Stones of Venice, Volume the Second, The Sea Stories*, Smith, Elder & Co., London 1853, pp. 151–231.

122 Cited after: Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life*, p. 206.

123 John Ruskin, *Unto This Last & Other Essays on Art and Political Economy*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1907; James Clark Sherburne, *John Ruskin, or the Ambiguities of Abundance: a Study in Social and Economic Criticism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972, pp. 20–21, 98–107.

124 Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, pp. 189–190.

As Ruskin foretold, "Day after day your souls will become more mechanical, more servile."[125] Art also would be completely destroyed by industry, since beautiful designs and patterns can only be created by free people in a beauteous, harmonious, and morally sound environment. Art is the antithesis of modern slavery, and the factory towns have become hotbeds of depravity and filthiness – "the smoke of their sin going up into the face of heaven like the furnace of Sodom, and the pollution of it rotting and raging through the bones and the souls of the peasant people round them, as if they were each a volcano whose ashes broke out in blains upon man and upon beast."[126]

The only hope for rescue – and it was really high time – would be to drive industry out of the cities, preferably removing it to the colonies, whilst the manufactories ought to be limited to manufacturing products requiring standardisation, and workshops of craftsmen-artists returned to favour – something Ruskin himself endeavoured to do by establishing the Guild of St. George. If there was no turning back from the chosen path, then the all-powerful market competition would stifle all social solidarity and morality, factory industry would complete its spiritual and physical degeneration of workers, and England would, ultimately, become a great sewage-drain and dustbin with a muddle of viaducts towering above it, for there will be no room for ordinary tracks and roads amidst the forest of chimneystacks.[127]

What is astonishing in Ruskin is the combination of his naïve and passé utopia of "garden England" and fanaticism of an intellectual luddite with his anticipation of problems and solutions that would in the following century become the daily bread of social policies, economic analyses of demand and consumption, the psychology and sociology of labour, and educational reform. Ruskin was also a principled critic of militarism, even when harnessed in the service of British imperial interests, although he did recognise ethical duty in politics – as, for instance, when calling for British intervention in defence of the Polish uprising in

125 John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera. Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, Vol. 4, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1886, p. 110.

126 Philippe Jaudel, "Ruskin's vision of two cities", in Hulin and Coustillas (eds.), *Vitorian Writers and the City*, 81; Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life*, 204–206; Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 147.

127 John Ruskin, *The Crown of Wild Olive. Four Lectures on Industry and War*, Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1882, esp. pp. 166–174; Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, p. 103; Geoffrey Harpham, "Time running out: the Edwardian sense of cultural degeneration", *Clio*, 5, 1976, p. 284.

1863. His activities for raising ecological consciousness (not only in England) and his propagation of rules for protecting and restoring heritage monuments were pioneering.[128]

All these objectives would be realistic under the condition that a paternal government be established which would monopolise the energy and means for reforms and become capable of giving them the requisite direction. Laissez-faire doctrine was for Ruskin utterly discredited, as it resisted any idea of acting in the common interest. Rather than to a *Utopia*, automatic progress would lead to a *Kakotopia*,[129] a moral, aesthetical, intellectual, or even physical depletion, and to hatred whose effects had just been made apparent in Paris. The tragedy of the Commune reinforced Ruskin's conviction that Paris was an incarnation of Evil.[130] The incessant race of production and manufacture, possession, and ambition is the offspring of devilish temptation: "It is indeed certain that advancing knowledge will guide us to less painful methods of human toil; but in the true Utopia, man will rather harness himself, with his oxen, to his plough, than leave the devil to drive it."[131]

In order to bring the Kingdom of God onto the earth, one must find in oneself, and in culture, the lost love, cheerfulness, and spontaneity of a child. "I can tell you," Ruskin prophesied in the late years of the century and of his own long life, "on the ways most of us go, the faster we slide back the better. Slide back into the cradle, if going on is into the grave […]."[132] And, he goes on, "Change *must* [italics original] come; but it is ours to determine whether change of growth, or change of death. […] Continue to make that forbidden deity [the goddess of commercial success – J.J.] your principal one, and soon no more art, no more science, no more pleasure will be possible. Catastrophe will come ; or, worse than catastrophe, slow mouldering and withering into Hades."[133] The mould and rust,

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128   Sherburne, *John Ruskin*, pp. 196–202, 230–240, and passim; Introduction by Irena Wojnar to: John Ruskin, *Sztuka, społeczeństwo, wychowanie: wybór pism*, trans. Zofia Doroszowa and Maria Treter-Horowitzowa, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977.

129   *Kakos* is the Greek for "bad", "evil".

130   Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Vol. 2, p. 36; cf. Sherburne, *John Ruskin*, 285; Jaudel, *'Ruskin's Vision'*, pp. 73–74.

131   Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Vol. 8, p. 168.

132   Ruskin, *The Crown of Wild Olive*, p. 60.

133   Ibidem, pp. 93, 97.

rot and neglect characterising England's decrepitude had become, by the end of the century, the persistent images haunting the prophet of the country's fall.[134]

That repugnant century was also to become the age of the *masses*. Fear of the masses, dread of what they might bring to the public arena, was shared by many a liberal and radical and no less by the Tories. The reasons for this varied, in fact, Mill feared most of all that democracy would be a rule of collective mediocrity, exterminating any individuality, freedom of thought and conscience, and cultural diversity. He had experienced the conformist pressure of public opinion in his own time, when "every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship." Later on, things could go even worse: "the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind."[135]

Carlyle, who always saw the modern history of Europe as a strand of disasters, had for a long time alarmed the British elites with the vision of an anarchistic revolution of sans-culottes which could only be brought under control by an authoritarian and charismatic hero-ruler. With time, the spread of electoral rights seemed to him the path to society's self-destruction.[136] And although none of his contemporaries could match his apocalyptic bombast, he was not alone in his anxieties.

The 1867 reform, carried out by the House of Commons through Disraeli's skilful manoeuvre and affording electoral rights to a considerable portion of the British working class (with the observance of low tax qualification), was considered by its promoters and opponents alike to have been a *leap in the dark*. Nobody was quite certain whether, and by whom, the *masses* would allow themselves to be governed, and whether their political empowerment would have a stabilising effect on the State or, conversely, undermine it. "The wide gift of the elective franchise will be a great calamity to the whole nation, and to those who gain it as great a calamity as to any," Walter Bagehot, a conservative liberal, predicted.[137]

Before the socialists appropriated it for their use, the very term *masses* expressed some unclear misgivings. The word often appeared alongside descriptions

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134   Harpham, 'Time Running Out', pp. 284–285.

135   John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, London: John W. Parker and Son, 1859, pp. 110, 118, 131–133; Asa Briggs, *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, Vol. 1, Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1985, pp. 38–39.

136   Thomas Carlyle, "Latter-Day Pamphlets, No. 6: Parliaments", in Shelston (ed.), *Carlyle's Selected Writings*, esp. pp. 302–311. See also Introduction by Alan Shelston (pp. 7–31).

137   Quoted after: Briggs, *Victorian People*, p. 301.

such as *multitude* or *mob*.[138] While *classes* had their interests, *masses* had only instincts, and thus were erratic and unpredictable; under the influence of demagogues, they could easily become a destructive force. A society without a hierarchy is doomed to disintegration – Ruskin was convinced about this no less than Arnold or Carlyle.[139]

Yet these anxieties were exaggerated, at least in England itself. Society did not disintegrate, and democracy did not destroy the historical institutions. Still, as politicians of all the parties were more and more avidly soliciting new voters, and the press for the masses was becoming increasingly vulgar, intellectuals had all the more reason to be concerned about the degeneration of public life and did not take comfort in the fact that the masses appeared more susceptible to imperial, rather than class-related, slogans. Towards the end of the century, Western civilisation was changing – and the problem was not so much the question of what evil could democracy do to England, but rather the question what *mass society* and the *mob* could do to democracy.[140] And, whether they might be tamed by *culture*, even a popular culture, or would they rather be disposed to play the part of some new barbarians to whom all that is human and beautiful would be alien.

William Morris was an optimist in this respect. This poet, artist, visionary, and social activist was the last of the line of great romanticist critics of bourgeois culture; he considered Ruskin his spiritual master. It was from Ruskin that he drew his conviction about the inextricable link between labour, art, and morality, and he shared his mentor's feeling that *mechanisation* was inimical to life, as it crushed any natural and organic desires, above all the drive for beauty. The religious leanings of the author of *The Stones of Venice* were, however, alien to him; he sought inspiration not only in Gothic and pre-Raphaelite art, but also in the pre-Christian Germanic and Celtic mythologies.[141] Of special importance to him was an idea similar to that which begot the Guild of St. George; rather than merely beholding works of art, their creation by workers was meant to unleash the energy and joy of work that were suppressed by the discipline of factory labour and civilisational training.[142] As he stated, "It is not this or that tangible steel and brass machine which we want to get rid of, but the great intangible machine

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138   Williams, *Keywords*, p. 161; Pike, *The Image of the City*, pp. 110–111.

139   Sherburne, *John Ruskin*, pp. 216–217, 225–226; Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 115.

140   Williams, *Keywords*, pp. 161–163; Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses*, pp. 30–33.

141   Edward Palmer Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, London: Merlin Press, 1977, esp. pp. 176–185, 196–199.

142   Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, p. 104.

of commercial tyranny, which oppresses the lives of all of us."[143] Thus, the task art faces is liberation-oriented; it must replace the degrading mechanical regime in which the link between labour and its products has been lost.[144]

Morris's nature dictated him to be practical. He set up a manufacturing partnership, a sort of arts-and-crafts cooperative, which designed and made functional art objects, household equipment items, wallpapers, fabrics, and lamps. Thanks to its creator's and manager's talents, the Merton Abbey-based firm gave rise to the English equivalent of Art Nouveau and proved a real commercial success! The originality and beauty of the designs by Morris and his students ensured their marketability and, with time, enabled them to use the models for series manufacturing. These products can until this day be admired at functional art museums and exhibits, and thanks in the most part to these works of art, the William Morris name endures in posterity.

Success did not spoil the man, it even caused him moral discomfort.[145] His aversion toward industrial capitalism, what he described as "a shoddy age," grew with time to the limits of obsession. He saw Victorian civilisation almost entirely through the prism of its capability to repress material and emotional needs, a force destructive to interpersonal solidarity, monuments of art, and the beauty of nature.

> Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization […]. The hope of the past times was gone, the struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion; the immediate future seemed to me likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilization had settled down on the world.[146]

Science has also become subordinate to that loathsome system of bookkeeping, drill, and constraint. A science that nowise cares about decent human goals, even though they are within its reach; it could, for instance, teach Manchester "how to consume its own smoke, or Leeds how to get rid of its superfluous black dye without turning it into the river." But what science prefers to do is to satisfy the appetites of idlers or devise some ever-powerful means of warfare.[147]

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143 Quoted after: ibidem, p. 124.

144 Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 158.

145 Asa Briggs, ed., *William Morris, Selected Writings and Designs,* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, p. 31.

146 Ibidem, p. 36; Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, pp. 113–124.

147 Briggs (ed.), *William Morris*, pp. 103, 298.

Only faith can lead one from this profound sense of historical senselessness and the devaluation of the world. Morris found faith for himself in socialism, at least declaratively, in its Marxian version, having nothing to do whatsoever with the Fabian Society ideas – businesslike, compromising and pragmatic as they were, and inclined to salon disputes.[148] In contrast to Ruskin, Morris had no head for economy, though he did agonise over *Das Kapital* with a self-sacrificing zeal.[149] Marx's thoughts on alienation would have probably been closer to him, but he could not have been aware of them. What he drew from Marxism was a total negation of the capitalist system, the axiom of class struggle, contempt of liberal and *mechanical progress* and of half-measure reforms, and the revolutionary potential; his socialism, however, preserved pure moral motivations. It was a zealous faith that restored a sense of meaning to the world and a sense of purpose to this man, whose resources of energy were incredible. It was with meagre success that he endeavoured to infect English workers with that faith, tirelessly explaining to them the principles of socialism at courses or meetings.[150]

He cooperated with anarchists from the Socialist League for some time, but their wild individualism and lack of consensus about any organisational discipline ultimately distanced him from that circle. With his strong personality, he found it difficult, if at all, to fit into any party, and centralised administration was no less loathsome to him than capitalism.

Morris wrote his *News from Nowhere* (1890) as a rebuttal to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, the extremely popular American utopian science-fiction novel. A comparison of these two didactic futuristic novels easily reveals the difference in the visions they offer. Bellamy admired the fantastic technologies of a future, the comforts of life, and the Boston *industrial army* he foresaw for the year 2000. On the other hand, the main character of the Morris story wakes up after a long sleep in London and is struck, primarily, by the disappearance of factories, cranes, and railways, the purity of the Thames, the restored beauty of the garden city, the lack of constraint or embarrassment in interpersonal relations, and the spontaneous and voluntary nature of activities undertaken for the common good. The liberation of labour, emotions, sensitivity

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148 Thompson, *William Morris*, pp. 539–541, 726, and passim.

149 Briggs (ed.), *William Morris*, p. 34.

150 Ibidem, p. 35. Cf. Williams, *Culture and Society*, pp. 160–161; Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform*, p. 258.

to beauty, and repressed sensual energy form the core of this utopia, which was designed as an illustrative antithesis of the Victorian community.[151]

This radiant vision of a new society was to come only after a revolution – and Morris had no illusions that such a revolution would be a mild one. He watched for the *barbarians* impatiently; following his great predecessors Carlyle and Ruskin, he afforded the *barbarians* (in his prehistoric novels) a zeal for freedom and the mission to cleanse the world of the rot of imperial *Rome*. Rome symbolised, of course, the tyranny of industrialism and imperialism, while the barbarians stood for the proletariat and salvation.[152] "I have no more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future of 'civilization'," he wrote in an 1885 letter, "which I *know* [italics original] now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies […] I used really to despair once because I thought what the idiots of our day call progress would go on perfecting itself: happily I know now that all that will have a sudden check […]."[153]

Thus, this righteous and suave humanist, an artist sensitive to good, beauty, and man's humility, succumbed to the known revolutionary paradox. So eager and impatient was he to see the earth's face renewed, that he was willing to accept ruthless means and measures in the name of such a transformation. Apparently, the land of freedom and happiness in *News from Nowhere* would be preceded by the destruction of England in a civil war, for the *party of order* will offer fierce and senseless resistance to the no less determined revolutionaries.[154] As Morris confessed to another of his correspondents, "I mean that we must not say 'We must drop our purpose rather than carry it across this river of violence.' To say that means casting the whole thing into the hands of chance, and we can't do that: we *can't* [italics original] say, if this is the evolution of history, let it evolve itself,

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151   William Morris, "News from Nowhere", in Briggs (ed.), *William Morris*; Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, p. 132; Thompson, *William Morris*, pp. 692–699.

152   Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses*, pp. 149–153.

153   A letter to Henderson from May 1885, quoted after: Jerome H. Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 72–73.

154   Morris, "News from Nowhere", pp. 294–300.

we won't help. The evolution will force us to help: will breed in us passionate desire for action, which will quench the dread of consequences [...]."[155]

Whilst William Morris's dreams fortunately remained unfulfilled, they show us the extremes reached by the humanistic critique of British industrialism. It would be erroneous to approach this criticism complacently just because it failed to inspire a mass movement. Victorian intellectuals enjoyed genuine authority and left a strong mark on nineteenth-century English intellectual culture. The moral unrest, or rather the horror that the most modern society on earth at the time aroused in them, is at least worthy of consideration. Even with all their one-sidedness and exaggerations, these critiques were voiced in defence of culture, against its degradation; defending the integrity of humans from their objectification. This line of thought will be followed into the twentieth century, producing multiple noteworthy related ideas, at least some of which were to prove very dangerous.

For the time being, however, we should devote some attention to the warnings and diagnoses of *degeneration* that, while rooted in completely different premises, would reach not so remote conclusions.

Evolution and Moral Progress

When writing about Victorian England, nearly all historians of English thought and culture describe it, particularly with respect to the period's first half, as a *time of doubt*, a time of uncertainty, when the immovable truths of faith and, together with them, the safe order of the world were shaken.[156] Such general characteristics are not easy to verify or to specifically define. True, these descriptions are based on numerous confessions found in the sources, but even this does not resolve the problem, as crises of faith affect the spiritual experience of more than just a single generation.

With this reservation in mind, we can, however, concede that a *sense of doubt* did extend to an appreciable part of the English, if not West European, intellectual elite in the middle of the nineteenth century. The reason for this was not an individual discovery or a specific scientific theory. True, geology and evolutionary biology tend to be identified by historians as the two strongest sources of the

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155   Letter to R. Thompson, July 1884, quoted after: Briggs (ed.), *William Morris*, p. 138. Cf. Briggs, *The Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, pp. 116–125.

156   *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, pp. 22–24, 73–77, 427, and passim; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, pp. 300, 312; Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, pp. 10–11, 66–67.

spiritual quandary. Indeed, Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) and the sciences that took their roots in geology undermined the naïve belief in the biblical calendar by increasingly extending the age of Earth and of life on it, and the Anglican church, where the authority of the Holy Scripture was taken seriously, would not have been indifferent to this.[157] Coming from Germany, the echoes of philological studies on the Bible as a collection of historical texts deepened the breach. Further, hypotheses on the transformations of plant and animal species, which appeared in European thought at least from the time of Lamarck's *Philosophy of Zoology* (1809), familiarised people of science with the idea that the world was not necessarily made by its Creator "in running order." But perhaps it was not so much the results of individual sciences – often disputable in themselves at the time – as the very method of recording empirical observations and scientific rules for drawing conclusions, that familiarised minds with the new way of justifying one's convictions, thus more and more frequently causing a cumbersome cognitive dissonance – or, to put it otherwise – a clamour of inflexible truths.

In 1844, the historian G.H. Lewes described his time as "an age of universal anarchy of thought, with strong desire for organization; – an age, succeeding one of destruction, anxious to reconstruct, – anxious, but as yet impotent. The desire of belief is strong; convictions are wanting: there is neither spiritual nor moral union. In this plight we may hope for the future, but can *cling* [italics original] only to the past: that alone is secure, well-grounded."[158] John Stuart Mill, a contemporary of Lewes not prone to exaggeration, noted a similar experience in 1854: "Those who should be the guides of the rest, see too many sides to every question. They hear so much said, or find that so much can be said, about everything, that they feel no assurance of the truth of anything."[159]

While the natural sciences were undergoing a period of immensely prolific development and enjoyed increasing authority, on the most general philosophical or ideological level, they destroyed faster than they could create, and more often proved a source of competing hypotheses than the desired certainty of judgment. The multitude of scientific opinions on numerous issues resembled the multitude of political opinions and thus at times led to similar sceptical sentiments. "Many people in our time," the philosopher and publicist John Morley found in 1874, "have so ill understood the doctrine of liberty, that in some of the

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157   John W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory,* Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 111–113.

158   Ibidem, p. 94.

159   Quoted after: Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 13.

most active circles in society they now count you a bigot if you hold any proposition to be decidedly and unmistakably more true than any other."[160]

The cracked and incoherent image of the world, a world that appeared problematic down to its very foundations, stirred the cognitive passion of creative minds and was sometimes the cause of torment, as a host of testimonies tell us. All the more so that the positivistic or – as historians sometimes prefer to call it – naturalistic model of science which was gaining prevalence at the time with its dry determinism, the rigours of the inductive method, and the invalidation of metaphysical questions, was incapable of efficiently replacing the undermined truths of faith in their function as lending an order and meaning to life. Leslie Stephen, a historian of ideas and one of the most influential intellectuals of the Victorian era, expressed this conviction in his penetrating *An Agnostic's Apology* (1893):

> The love of abstract truth is the feeblest of all human passions. […] Even the most vigorous of thinkers have found their stimulus in some practical need, and reasoning has been only the instrument for securing some end prescribed by the emotions. […] if the reasoning process did not lead them to the desired end, it has generally been the logic, and not the desired conclusion, which was finally sacrificed. To the great mass of mankind a sacrifice of consistency or of rigid proof is, of course, no sacrifice at all.[161]

No wonder, then, that those who nevertheless preferred the logic of rationalism over the logic of faith experienced rather often a sense of loss. Abundant evidence of what Max Weber called the *disenchantment of the world* and what Nietzsche described as the *death of God* can be found in Victorian biographies, both authentic and literary, in response to the spiritual hunger evoked by scientific naturalism. There is probably no more poignant testimony of this crisis than the one recorded in the diary of the young Miss Beatrice Potter, who was brought up in a tolerant London home which was visited by the most eminent English minds. As she noted in 1876: "I see now that the year I spent at Bournemouth I was vainly trying to smother my instinct of truth in clinging to the old faith. And now that I have shaken off the chains of the beautiful old faith, shall I rise to something higher or shall I stare about me like a newly liberated slave, unable to decide which way to go, and perhaps the worse for being freed from the service of a kind of master? Do I look on death and trouble with less calmness than

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160   Quoted after: ibidem, p. 179.
161   Leslie Stephen, "Poisonous Opinions", in *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons; London: Smith, Elder, & Co. 1893. p. 323.

I used?" The adult Beatrice Webb, the known Fabian socialist, had the following to say about this entry and similar ones she had once made:

> We lived, indeed, in a perpetual state of ferment, receiving and questioning all contemporary hypotheses as to the duty and destiny of man in this world and the next. Into this all-questioning state of mind were thrust the two most characteristic of current assumptions: first, that physical science could solve all problems; and secondly, that every one, aided by a few elementary textbooks, could be his own philosopher and scientist. […] It is not surprising that the first fifteen years of my thinking life were spent, not in learning a craft, but in seeking a creed by the light of which I could live the life I had to lead.[162]

This search and the dilemma of the *old* and *new religion* were to continue for yet a long time. The *religion of science* was alluring with its rationality and aroused wonder for the overwhelming enormity and order of the universe but could offer no buttress in moments of existential despair or feelings of the senselessness of existence. Its seductive opposite, the promise of salvation, was not so much Protestantism, which referred to the individual authority to judge, but rather (and not only for Beatrice Potter) the communion of the Catholic Church, which freed one from the anguish of responsibility for the very content of the faith. "Add to this the beautiful Catholic ritual, and the temptation to commit this intellectual (and perhaps moral) suicide is strong to one whose life without a religious faith is unbearable."[163] And not so much without faith, but even more so without prayer through which humans can find the purpose of their existence on earth. "For science is bankrupt in deciding the destiny of man; she lends herself indifferently to the destroyer and to the preserver of life, to the hater and to the lover of mankind. Yet any avoidance of the scientific method in disentangling 'the order of things,' any reliance on magic or on mystical intuition in selecting the process by which to reach the chosen end, spells superstition and usually results in disaster."[164]

This record of her deepest inner experience may still, as it seems, serve as an example of a significant process of an epoch in which a considerable part of the intellectual elite were quitting the dogmatic faith, the Church of England, and theology.[165] As is well known, the publication of Darwin's great work *On the*

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162 Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926, pp. 57, 83–84.

163 Ibidem, pp. 100–101; for more on conversions to Roman Catholicism, see e.g. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, pp. 99–101.

164 Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, 105, cf. Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: the Rise of Sociology*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 135–136.

165 Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: the Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press,

Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection in 1859 dramatically highlighted the long-suspected discrepancies between the *Genesis* myth and the knowledge of evolution, rendering it extremely difficult to maintain a fundamental reading of the Bible and accelerating the secularisation of European intellectual life. Yet overall, the process was not linear, unlike in the abovementioned individual case. Not having an actual chance to mock Darwinism (attempts at which were nowise abandoned), the Christian Churches endeavoured to interpret the canon of the faith in such a way as to avoid open conflict with scientific thought.[166] Intellectuals found their own ingenious strategies for alleviating the dissonance of beliefs, but even avowed agnostics (a euphemistic description for atheists) were not all happy or self-assured. Thomas Huxley, one of those least distressed, wrote, rather sarcastically, of his colleagues that "many of the best minds of these days […] watch what they conceive to be the progress of materialism, in such fear and powerless anger as a savage feels, when, during an eclipse, the great shadow creeps over the face of the sun. The advancing tide of matter threatens to drown their souls; the tightening grasp of law impedes their freedom; they are alarmed lest man's moral nature be debased by the increase of his wisdom."[167]

Some scholars looked for a solution outside the religion versus scientific naturalism alternative, which they found distasteful as it denied the moral autonomy of man. In fact, the methodological delay in the cultural and social sciences had left a gap the natural sciences tried to fill by extending their deterministic pattern to the history of civilisation and theory of morality. Some outsiders rebelled against the invasion – at least some from the circles of brilliant autodidacts, who were aplenty in that period when the organisation of science had not yet become rigid; rebelling, they heralded a British variety of the anti-positivist breakthrough, whilst some of them frequented the stray paths of Victorian intellectual culture.[168] And so, the great naturalist Alfred Wallace, an autonomous contributor (along with Darwin) to the theory of evolution through natural selection, strongly believed that science could discover moral truths that would allow man to soar high above his animal nature. He pinned this hope, increasingly strongly as the years passed, in phrenology, which he saw as the psychology of the future,

1974, pp. 31–35; Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life*, 86–89; Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds*, pp. 204, 306.

166   Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1959, pp. 371–376, 425–426.

167   Quoted after: Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 71.

168   Turner, *Between Science and Religion*, pp. 15–30, 246–256; cf. Jacob Bronowski, "Unbelief and science", in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, p. 169.

as well as in spiritualism, which he practiced, elevating knowledge of the influence of *higher existences* on moral and intellectual progress to the level of theory.[169]

The research-related and prestigious successes of the empirical sciences by no means diminished interest in the secrets of "psychical" research, spiritualism, occultism, telepathy, or Christian Science as imported from America. On the contrary, the blossoming of those movements accompanied the development of laboratory tests and the laicisation of the British intelligentsia, as if their unsatisfied needs for spiritual experience forced them to seek replacement nourishment.[170] Since the criteria of scientific status were not yet stringent, and the methodological difference between telepathy and wireless telegraph was not quite apparent, one could deal with parapsychology as a serious field of knowledge without risking one's scientific honour; it was just that such knowledge did not fall within the framework of a "mechanistic" image of the world. Although Theosophists, Gnostics, Swedenborgianists, worshipers of light, Bahá'ists, European Buddhists, and the like were even harder to match with that model, all of those faiths and cults endeavoured to reconcile in a variety of ways mystical initiation with a rationalistic approach, which made them attractive to scientists and scholars.[171] A historian of the intellectual climate of the Victorian era writes, perhaps somewhat exaggeratingly, that sensitive intellectuals experienced a "paralysis of doubt," the "anguish of sceptical negation." Charles Kingsley, one of the leading Victorian authors, is appointed witness: "[…] we must pray to God to give us faith. […] faith in something – something that we can live for, and would die for. Then we shall be ready and able to do good in our generation."[172]

Only the conviction that humanity is capable of progress could serve as such a faith. The positivist Frederic Harrison admitted that "faith in human progress" was to be "in lieu of celestial rewards of the separate soul,"[173] filling the emptiness

169   Turner, *Between Science and Religion*, pp. 74–98.

170   Gustav Jahoda, *The Psychology of Superstition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, pp. 33–34; Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1968, pp. 135–140.

171   Jan Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras: Europe in 1900*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978, pp. 496–508.

172   Quoted after: Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 98.

173   John Bagnell Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origin And Growth*, London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1920, p. 346.

left by the shaken, if not lost, belief in Providence.[174] Although the idea of progress was not new, the achievements of knowledge and technology in an age when scientific talent in England proved so plentiful spoke more and more convincingly in its favour.

Was not the history of the last centuries one of "the rise and influence of rationalism in Europe," as the title of the extremely popular work by William Lecky (1865) had it? Then a twenty-six-year-old historian, Lecky became an outstanding representative of a school of thought that years afterwards was named the "Whig" interpretation of history. The light of reason dissipates the darkness of ignorance step by step. As the rational nature of humans develops, with each generation knowledge and wisdom also rise, and together with them, industry and political institutions securing freedom of conscience and advance in trade. Having gone ahead of the rest of humanity, liberal England has created the most perfect political and the most modern economic system seen so far.[175] "The nineteenth century," one of the numerous enthusiasts wrote, "has witnessed […] the overthrow of the barriers which prevented progress […] Despotism thwarts and frustrates the forces by which providence has provided for the progress of man; liberty secures for these forces their natural scope and exercise."[176]

The futuristic imagination of those later grandsons of Condorcet was boundless. Among them, Winwood Reade, a completely forgotten author today, enjoyed the highest popularity; his *The Martyrdom of Man* was published and republished in the 1870s many times. Trudging through the light of science was an act of martyrdom too. The future will reward man for that, establishing him as the ruler of the elements, the sovereign of steam and electricity, and – most importantly – the master of his own self:

> When we understand the laws which regulate the complex phenomena of life, we shall be able to predict the future as we are already able to predict comets and eclipses and the planetary movements. […] Not only will man subdue the forces of evil that are without; he will subdue those that are within. He will repress the base instincts and propensities which he has inherited from the animals below him; he will obey the laws written in his heart; he will worship the divinity that is within him. […] Disease will be extirpated; the

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174 John Bowle and Basil Willey, "Origins and development of the idea of progress", in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, p. 37.

175 Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, pp. 5–7, 17–29; Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 202.

176 Robert Mackenzie, *The 19th Century. A History*, London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1880, p. 460.

causes of decay will be removed; immortality will be invented. And then the earth being small, mankind will emigrate into space and will cross airless Saharas which separate planet from planet, and sun from sun. The earth will become a Holy Land which will be visited by pilgrims from all quarters of the universe. Finally, men will master the forces of Nature; they will become themselves architects of systems, manufacturers of worlds. Man will then be perfect; he will be a creator; he will therefore be what the vulgar worship as God.[177]

At the same time, travellers and anthropologists studying and describing the *savage* tribes in Africa, South America, Australia, and Oceania discovered, it would seem, the early stages of the same process of development and improvement of man and society. The idea whereby contemporary primitive societies reflected the long ago completed stages of development of the highest, that is, the European and North American cultures, was the basic hypothesis of cultural evolutionism that was established in the fundamental works of John Lubbock and Edward Tylor. This theory assumed a uniform potential of human nature and a one-size-fits-all developmental model, although it did not quite successfully explain why some peoples ascended the ladder of civilisation quickly while others satisfied themselves with various levels of savagery or barbarism. It was also necessary to assume that the development of moral and religious notions, no less than the overall condition of minds, must have more or less coincided at each cultural level with the status of technological skills and would have left archaeological remains which would be relatively the most easy to date and evaluate on the scale of progress.

Tylor deliberately blurred the differentiation of the notions of *culture* and *civilisation*, so important as it was in the English tradition. Although the title *Primitive Culture* must have seemed inconsistent to readers educated in the Arnoldian spirit – culture could not essentially be *primitive* – recognising it as a system for development and enrichment by no means led to equality of rights; there was not yet any concept of *cultures* in the plural in Tylor (when useful, he would rather write of *races*). Civilisation, according to Tylor, had degrees, ordered on a single scale.[178]

Tylor did realise that increased morality did not always keep pace with the development of science and technological skills. What is more, he admitted that there was some historical evidence, and prehistoric circumstantial evidence,

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177 Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man*, London: Trubner & Co., 1872, 513–515; cf. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, pp. 35–36.

178 George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, New York: The Free Press, 1968, pp. 84–90.

testifying to local degenerations or regressions of culture. Still, in the overall picture of the history of mankind, progress greatly prevailed over backwardness. Each century, in spite of whatever catastrophes occurred, would increase the knowledge and experiences of generations and ultimately their morality. According to Tylor, it was therefore Gibbon who was right, rather than De Maistre with his theory of degeneration.

> Savage moral standards are real enough, but they are far looser and weaker than ours. We may, I think, apply the often-repeated comparison of savages to children as fairly to their moral as to their intellectual condition. […] Altogether, it may be admitted that some rude tribes lead a life to be envied by some barbarous races, and even by the outcasts of higher nations. But that any known savage tribe would not be improved by judicious civilization, is a proposition which no moralist would dare to make; while the general tenor of the evidence goes far to justify the view that on the whole the civilized man is not only wiser and more capable than the savage, but also better and happier, and that the barbarian stands between.[179]

Evidently, cultural anthropology thus approaches idealisation – a trait rather familiar to positivistic concepts of history. It was not displeasing then, as it was strongly believed, that the rules of morality and happiness were derivable from positive knowledge, their realisation stemming from the operation of the laws of evolution. "The future happiness of our race," as Lubbock wrote in *Pre-Historic Times*, "which poets hardly ventured to hope for, science boldly predicts. Utopia, which we have long looked upon as synonymous with an evident impossibility, which we have ungratefully regarded as 'too good to be true,' turns out on the contrary to be the necessary consequence of natural laws."[180]

Herbert Spencer titled the first of his ambitious works *Social Statics: or, The Conditions essential to Happiness specified* (1851), thus, so to speak, delineating in advance an axiological horizon of what was not so much static but, rather, dynamic. In inheriting and constantly building on the experience of generations, and in his ever-improved adaptation to the existing conditions – always learning how to overcome the obstacles of fortune – social man develops the abilities he was originally equipped with and inevitably drives towards excellence.[181]

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179 Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Vo. 1, London: John Murray, 1871, pp. 32–42.

180 John Lubbock, *Pre-Historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1865, pp. 491–492.

181 Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, pp. 336–340; cf. Jerzy Szacki, *History of Sociological Thought*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979, pp. 226–227.

In subsequent years, however, Spencer had reservations regarding understanding progress as the assumed objective of history. Any instance of progress, he argued, whether in nature or in man's individual development, as well as in the history of mankind or in the histories of other nations, always consists in a gradual passage from simpler to more compound systems. Since every event causes multiple effects, and many ramified changes, then it becomes apparent that the differentiation and specialisation of functions, powers, institutions, customs, morals, social classes, languages, arts, crafts and skills must increase. What sequences of change have been set in motion by the construction and operation of railways, for instance! Or by scientific discoveries. And, as in the evolution of species, flawed and less adapted forms tend to decline, it is understandable that the history of civilisation would be subject to the law of progress. Yet, this would not mean that the most complicated metaphysical questions of the origin and the purpose of being and existence can be solved; after all, the man of science "learns at once the greatness and the littleness of human intellect – its power in dealing with all that comes within the range of experience; its impotence in dealing with all that transcends experience."[182]

Spencer's theory of altruism touches the core of the dispute about moral progress, as is most completely expressed in his *The Principles of Ethics* (1879). The primary form of altruism is, namely, concern for offspring and the continuation of the species; it thus has its roots, just as egoism, in the biological nature of man. Family sentiments gradually extend to the clan, tribe, and nation, their further development being hindered by the interests and mores of *military* societies – the main cause, along with hunger, of human suffering. Though not without resistance and deviations, civilisation tends toward the development of *industrial* and democratic societies, where conflicts are resolved through the exchange of services, agreement, and compromise, embracing respect of the rights of the individual. Along with this, cooperative behaviours gain an adaptive advantage and yield benefits. Consequently, "it becomes clear that regard for the well-being of others is increasing *pari passu* with the taking of means to secure personal well-being."[183]

And again, if population growth and the growth of the means of subsistence are successfully balanced, along with the expected containment of wars, colonialism, and inequalities in human rights, then it may be expected that as the woes of

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182 Herbert Spencer, "Progress, its Law and Cause", in *Essays: Scientific, Political, & Speculative*, Vol. 1, London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1891, pp. 8–62.

183 Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics*, Vol. 1, London: Williams and Norgate, 1904, p. 239.

humanity diminish, the hateful sentiments between nations connected with the ruthless *struggle for existence* will weaken. Sensitivity to the harms done to others will become natural, as will sympathy – calling for less and less sacrifice whilst more and more often allowing people to take pleasure in the joys of the others; thence, the very opposition of egoism and altruism will gradually disappear.[184]

The model proposed by Spencer, complemented by rich illustrative material, satisfied the expectations of a general theory that would reintroduce some conceptual order to the image of a world that had been shattered by the undermining of the Christian vision of natural history. The recognition of natural evolution and social evolution as the subsequent yet differing phases of one *cosmic* cycle worked for minds already familiar with the argument that scientific knowledge about man ought not to lay claim to a status separate from the natural sciences, or to its own methods. Lastly, "evolutionistic ethics," combining moral sense with a selection advantage, formed an eloquent proposition of solving one of the period's most troublesome intellectual dilemmas – namely, the question of the origin of ethical laws and their source of validity.[185]

In addition, liberal England, in spite of what Spencer saw as the still excessive expansion of the State's authority over the sovereign individual, was in any case the furthermost outpost of universal progress. It is always a nice feeling to be part of the main current of universal history, not to say at its lead, and to feel that mankind's great quest for knowledge, might, and happiness justifies the sacrifices, if need be. The trouble is that, as is the case with any overly broad theory, this radiant vision of history provoked questions, objections, and even derision.[186]

The well-known vicissitudes of ancient civilisations was an important source of those questions and objections. In England, a country where every student was schooled with the Bible and the classical authors alike, the lot of Nineveh and Tyre, Troy and Jerusalem, Thebes and Athens, Rome and Alexandria were constantly present in parliamentary as well as poetical rhetoric; and their presence became even more tangible with the sensational excavations of Layard, Schliemann, and Evans that made headlines in the daily press.[187] The mystery of the reasons behind the fall of these exquisite cities and states was a recurring

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184   Ibidem, pp. 297–300.

185   Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 64.

186   For a broader account on evolutionism in sociology and social anthropology, cf. Szacki, *History of Sociological Thought*, chapter 8; Robert A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 159–208.

187   Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, pp. 43–44.

topic – one can point to the enduring popularity of *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon, 1776 – and answers to this riddle usually took the form of some new variant of the old cyclical theory of history.

Influenced by the idea of progress, the cycle mainly resembled (as in Giambattista Vico's earlier concept) a spiral or a relay where one civilisation, having expired its creative powers, went into decline until its ruins were covered by earth, whereas a new cycle of history commenced with another civilisation, young and vigorous, which nonetheless could expect to share, with time, the lot of the previous one. This template was modifiable in a variety of ways. Race – quite convenient a notion, no less flexible than suggestive – was increasingly assumed as a lift of any civilisation. While some authors knew only three races existing on the earth – White, Yellow, and Black – others could identify as many as several dozen, which enabled multiple historical and, to a larger extent, prehistoric combinations.[188] Especially popular among them was the theory of the Teutonic origins of British political and legal institutions, which were formed in the struggle of the noble Anglo-Saxons with the worthless Celts. The idea was developed in the mid-nineteenth century by Robert Knox, an Edinburg professor of anatomy, and later refined by James Hunt, cofounder of the Anthropological Society of London, along with the Oxford-based historians Bishop William Stubbs and Edward Freeman.[189]

In the broader prehistoric perspective, the myth of the valiant, beauteous, and creative tribe of Aryans, taken over from philologists, proved useful. The more Asian and European nations and civilisations were derivable from it, the less was known of their Indo-European progenitors. The concept enjoyed growing popularity in the 1860s amongst intellectuals in England and on the Continent, often raising associations with the Teutonic motif; the Germans were considered the racially purest descendants of the Aryans.[190]

The details of all these theories are not our actual focus. What is essential is that speculations about the racial nature and origins of all the civilisations could be adapted to both the progressive and regressive visions of history. In the former case, they would serve – as will be seen – as a means of the ideological validation

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188 Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 82.

189 Ibidem, pp. 95–101; Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, pp. 61–62, 110; George Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: a History of European Racism*, New York: Howard Fertig, 1978, pp. 66–71.

190 Gossett, *Race*, pp. 123–125; Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, New York: The Free Press, 1997, pp. 56–58.

of imperialism, the White Man's mission, or the mission of individual nations which of course happen to be the bearers of the highest vital values. In the latter case, racial theories could offer a "scientific" avenue to express a post-romanticist nostalgia for the noble and virile times of sword battles, against which the mercantile civilisation of the day appeared as a period of decline. The biological connotations of the notion of "race" rendered it particularly prone to the modelling of history, inspiring physiological visions of birth, growth, maturity, senescence, and death. As we know, regardless of its technological élan, inventiveness, and economic expansion, contemporary Europe seemed old, decrepit, and impoverished to the late Romanticists, so diametrically different was their own ideal of society and culture. In fact, the language of race, soaked with vitalistic metaphors and imagery, allowed for rationalising those intuitions and reinforcing their expression. The most spectacular achievement in this respect was the merit of a certain Count de Gobineau, at the time a little-known figure even in his homeland; but even without his treatise *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, published 1853–1855, the idea of the imminent *degeneration* of the West had become part of the discursive domain by the middle of the century.

Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had little to do with social history on the surface. In any case, this work of strict natural science gave no grounds for any legitimate conclusions with respect to the history of human civilisations. All the same, the study did exert an enormous psychological and methodological impact on this particular domain. By conclusively consolidating the historical dimension of botany and zoology, Darwin contributed, whatever his intention, to a strengthened view of the history of mankind through the lens of the natural sciences. Was history not a direct continuation, if not merely a fragment, of the history of the human species? Were the laws operating in it not identical, or at least similar, to those? No sharp demarcation could be drawn between the natural sciences and the study of civilisation, nor to the object and method of investigation; the successful achievements of geologists, palaeontologists, and evolutionists were impressive and served as a model for archaeologists, ethnologists, and historians.[191] This trend was mainly reflected in the language. In England, if not elsewhere, everyone was debating on *evolution*, *natural selection*, *the struggle for existence*, and *the survival of the fittest* (the last of these, known to have been coined by Spencer, has become a key term in the language of evolution). Moreover, those

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191 See the introduction by Noel Annan in Noel Annan (ed.), *Leslie Stephen, Selected Writings in British Intellectual History*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. XXIV.

studying human history did not necessarily understand the rationale behind Darwin's theory and did not always realise that when their organicist notions were applied to a completely different subject they become metaphors (for that matter, they already had a metaphorical sense in biology).[192]

A conscientious natural scientist, Darwin himself did not encourage such extrapolations based on his theory, but he was not quite consistent in this respect. *On the Origin of Species* concludes with the statement that "the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world. Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of equally inappreciable length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection."[193]

This final chord, as evidently axiological as it is and transgressing the horizon of natural evolution, has obviously been cited a thousand times over and used as one of the beams of the bridge constructed to link biology and sociology. Progressivists, who wanted to see evolution as a process of the continuous improvement of nature in general and, consequently, of the human species and human works, implied that Darwinism carried with it an element of *entelechy*, which meant there was a purposefulness of subsequent transformations. On the other hand, references were made to some of Darwin's less optimistic opinions, such as those from *The Descent of Man* – namely, those which implied a fear that the artificial environment of civilisation, suppressing the operation of natural selection, might exert a harmful influence on the quality of the species.[194] Hence, both optimists and pessimists were convinced that their own prophecies were grounded in the authority of Darwin; in fact, the impact was reciprocal, as Darwin did read his interpreters as well.[195]

The progressivist cause fared much better. The idea of the great path that man had travelled from animal form to the laboratories of British scholars instilled faith in the genius of humankind. Through all the more or less incidental events and occurrences, in spite of epochs of stagnation, blind alleys, falls and decay, man's adaptive invention, his ability to find creative answers to the ever-novel challenges of his environment, his capacity to learn and to transfer experiences,

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192   Szacki, *History of Sociological Thought*, p. 239.
193   Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, London: John Murray, 1859, p. 489. Cf. Bowle and Willey, "Origins and development of the idea of progress", p. 36.
194   Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, p. 260.
195   Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, p. 94.

had constantly led man toward the peak of the evolutionary process. The problem in this was that all searches for traces of the path travelled so far in order to link them with the earlier history of the development of homo sapiens's mind encountered a threshold over which any evolutionistic schema would stumble: the phase, namely, where symbolic language emerges and since when the accumulation of experiences, abilities and skills, ideas and concepts, and their social transmission were possible. Earlier on, before this threshold was attained, there was, quite clearly, no species-specific learning or passing on of experiences to their offspring or descendants; there was merely the blind and directionless process of adaptations and selections, to which no linear measure of development could in fact be applied.

Victorian thought overcame this inconvenience in two ways, so to speak. First, the philosophy of history adjusted its schema to suit the image of natural evolution, allowing for the genetic transmission of the acquired characteristics and wisdoms of the species, thereby replacing the inconvenient Darwin with a Lamarck of sorts – as we know was the case with Spencer.[196] Or, conversely, biology invaded history and sociology, neglecting the peculiarity of cultural processes and superimposing upon them a network of evolutional and deterministic concepts; thus, *social Darwinism* originated, a concept for which Darwin bears the least responsibility.[197]

But what would not have been seen in terms of social Darwinism? Gertrude Himmelfarb, the consummate American researcher specialising in English Victorian ideas, responds to this question in a way that is certainly worth quoting:

> It was appealed to by nationalists as an argument for a strong state, and by the proponents of laissez-faire as an argument for a weak state. It was condemned by some as an aristocratic doctrine designed to glorify power and greatness, and by others, like Nietzsche, as a middle-class doctrine appealing to the mediocre and submissive. Some socialists saw in it the scientific validation of their doctrine; others the negation of their moral and spiritual hopes. Militarists found in it the sanction of war and conquest, while pacifists – the power of physical force transmuted into the power of intellectual and moral persuasion. […] Some complained because it exalted men to the level of supermen or gods; others because it degraded them to the status of animals.[198]

For the purpose of our considerations, the dispute over moral progress is key. Seen from the European perspective, the development of the cognitive powers

196   Ibidem, pp. 91–97.
197   Henry Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: the Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890–1930*, New York: Octagon Books, 1976, pp. 38–39.
198   Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, p. 407.

and technological might of mankind, of social institutions and the comforts of life was undeniable in spite of all the civilisational disasters having occurred on its way. This sufficed for the doctrine of progress to become a platitude for the educated classes – a source of popular clichés in colloquial speech and overused rhetoric for politicians and journalists.[199] But there was no consensus on whether moral notions and standards tended to improve along with cognitive and technological proficiencies, the trend the evolutionists believed to have been occurring. For if this was not the case, the entire edifice of civilisation could once again turn out to have been erected on quicksand.

Christian historical pessimists saw no evidence of moral progress. For instance, Dublin Archbishop Richard Whately argued (and he was not the first to do so) in his lecture *On the Origins of Civilization* delivered in 1854 – ten years before Pope Pius IX promulgated the *Syllabus of Errors* – that the deplorable condition of savage tribes is a visible effect of the degradation whose underlying cause was the original sin. While some nations have managed to get out of this degeneration through the development of sciences, arts, and skills, spiritual progress is separate from the material and can only take place with God's grace and furtherance. As a historian has put it, "Whately was not alone in arguing the degenerationist point of view, and throughout the 1860s the issue of degenerationism and progressionism was the subject of widespread and even acrimonious debate among English intellectuals."[200]

Regarded – not too accurately – as the father of social Darwinism, Walter Bagehot[201] could find no confirmation in history of the argument that progress would be a commonplace phenomenon, let alone the developmental rule of human societies. Progress is unknown to wild peoples; their beliefs, rites and moral ideas have always been dire, and only ruthless laws and the power of authority could ever render them internally organised, enforce obedience, consistent and stable dispositions, and impose religions and mores which could be transferred from one generation to another by way of inheritance or imitation. Progress called for quite the opposite dispositions: breaking inherited habits or customs and the barriers between nations; blending of races and castes; toleration for difference; and freedom of political debate. Such conditions did appear locally in the past but generally expired after some time. Only the nations tracing their

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199   Bury, The Idea of Progress, p. 341; Szacki, History of Sociological Thought, p. 240.

200   Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, p. 75; Richard Whately, "On the Origin of Civilisation", in *Miscellaneous Lectures and Reviews*, London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861, pp. 26–59.

201   Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, pp. 403–404.

origins to Europe have continued to move forward, having at first gained predominance in warfare, thereby proving their superiority, and, with time, strongly boosting the progress of thought and the refinement of sentiments (though, not among all its members – suffice it to talk to your own servants!).[202]

Hence, stagnation is the general rule of the world, while progress is a rare though momentous exception, in which the success of the most resilient and morally superior nations is manifested. Still, success would not protect them from the danger of slippage forever. Civilisations can degenerate, now as well as they did in the past; France after 1848 being an illustrative case in point: the nation, not yet united enough to afford freedom of opinions and beliefs without punishment, had to make a step backward to the dictatorship stage. In any case, the varnish of civilised mores covers the inherently barbaric nature of humans and societies across the Western nations; it does not take much for it to surface like a latent disease consuming an apparently sound organism. It is enough for the masses, in a flurry of excitement sparked by whatever stimulus, to reject the leadership of their political elites and give in to their inextinguishable atavistic leanings, and the society almost readily resumes its barbaric properties.[203]

Bagehot and others of his sort would soon invoke evolutionist naturalists – for example, Edwin Lankester, whose 1880 study, *Degeneration: a Chapter in Darwinism*, built a footbridge connecting the banks of biology and social philosophy by maintaining that in the history of civilisation, just as in nature, easier and less stimulating conditions bring about a decrease in energy and a retrograde step toward earlier stages of development: "we are accustomed to regard ourselves as necessarily progressing, as necessarily having arrived at a higher and more elaborated condition […] and as destined to progress still further. […] it is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress."[204] Alfred Tennyson, the philosophical poet

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202   Walter Bagehot, *Physics and politics or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of "Natural selection"' and "Inheritance" to Political Society*, London: Henry S. King and Co., 1872, passim.

203   Stuart C. Gilman, "Political Theory and Degeneration", in Edward J. Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (eds.), *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 188–190.

204   Edwin Ray Lankester, *Degeneration. A Chapter in Darwinism*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1880, pp. 59–60, quoted after: Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: a European Disorder, c. 1848 – c. 1918*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 217; cf. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, pp. 195–196.

of the Victorian age, expressed a similar thought, finding a somewhat different language for it:

> Evolution ever climbing after some ideal good,
> And Reversion ever dragging Evolution in the mud.[205]

But, in fact, no "general laws of evolution" were known that would finally and validly refer to social phenomena on equal footing with natural ones – to conflicts between nations no less than to ontogenetic intraspecific rivalry for survival and reproduction – laws essential for progress or degeneration to occur. The biologisation of social theories manifested itself in the language and analogies used rather than in the raw content of their observations. The language, however, organised the discursive space, which was hard to escape when, for instance, a discussion would turn to the sources of morality.

It is extremely interesting that the principal attack on the evolutionary concept of ethics was made not by a philosopher or a historian, but by a leading authority of the Darwinian school and a professed scientist and agnostic. Thomas Huxley's 1893 lecture, *Evolution and Ethics* (and the *Prolegomena* added to it in print), is dramatic evidence of the author's break with social determinism. The idea that civilisation is merely a continuation or a higher tier of evolution, with ethics being nothing other than an instrument of struggle and adaptation, was viewed by Huxley as the "gladiatorial theory of existence." Evolution cannot possibly offer any ethical model; even if one accepts that the ability to sympathise has developed owing to evolution, the same holds true all the more for egoism and aggressive instincts. Nature has never taught anyone how to tell the difference between good and evil, or how to understand an individual's obligations to the human community. Culture and morality form an artificial garden created and tended by man contrary to and in struggle against nature.[206] Just as in Mathew Arnold's epigram:

> Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends;
> Nature and man can never be fast friends.[207]

Struggle with the animal nature is primarily the wrestling of moral consciousness, conscience, and altruism with aggressive impulses – a factor that restrains social conflict, but causes instead a tragic split of personality. This fight between

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205   Alfred Tennyson, *Locksley Hall*, quoted after: Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, p. 54.

206   Thomas H. Huxley, *Evolution & Ethics and Other Essays*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1894, pp. 12–19, 82–85.

207   Quoted after: Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, p. 379.

the dwarf and the Titan will never be finally won, although the dwarf's intelligence can every now and then bend the Titan to his will. Increased learning and self-discipline do not, however, promise happiness or escape from pain, or even universal justice. On the contrary, civilisation is a source of suffering, anxiety, and disillusionment. Still, it is the human duty, simply as human beings, to stalwartly face the evils of this world.[208]

This unusual manifesto of a learned naturalist against extrapolating scientific naturalism into the realm of moral culture proposed no alternative philosophy of history. Belief in the possibility of humanity's perfection and in lasting peace on earth was commonplace in the middle of the century, Huxley remarked, while recently pessimists were being heard as well: "The majority of us, I apprehend, profess neither pessimism nor optimism. […] Those who have failed to experience the joys that make life worth living are, probably, in as small a minority as those who have never known the griefs that rob existence of its savour and turn its richest fruits into mere dust and ashes."[209]

All the same, a Manichaean mood seems to be predominant in this not-quite-long text; as commented upon by the author some time afterwards:

> The doctrines of predestination, of original sin, of the innate depravity of man and the evil fate of the greater part of the race, of the primacy of Satan in this world, of the essential vileness of matter, of malevolent Demiurgus subordinate to a benevolent Almighty, who has only lately revealed himself, faulty as they are, appear to me to be vastly nearer the truth than the "liberal" popular illusions that babies are all born good, and that the example of a corrupt society is responsible for their failure to remain so; that it is given to everybody to reach the ethical ideal if he will only try; that all partial evil is universal good, and other optimistic figments.[210]

The polemical target of the Huxley essay was dual. The first was what he described as "the fanatical individualism of our time" – namely, the political philosophy which led the "social Darwinist" assumptions, which had been very mild in Spencer's approach, to the extremities expressed in the conviction that the struggle for existence in a society as well as in nature selects the most valuable individuals and groups and this process should not be disturbed as the outcome of the unrestrained play of egoisms is progress. "Reasoned savagery" was the term Huxley used to describe this particular view.[211]

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208 Huxley, *Evolution & Ethics*, pp. 55–56, 84–86.
209 Ibidem, p. 78.
210 Quoted after: Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, p. 38.
211 Huxley, *Evolution & Ethics*, pp. 40–42, 82, and footnote 21 on p. 115.

The other target of Huxley's polemic – particularly in the *Prolegomena* – were those who believed that, conversely, the natural selection mechanism has stopped working properly under the conditions of civilised society and thus needs to be supported or replaced by a planned, artificial selection, for only such selection can ensure the improvement or perfection of mankind. Huxley's opinion was unequivocal regarding those not-yet-named eugenicists who saw morality as calculations of utility and approached society as breeders and would coldly consider active and passive methods of eradicating weak, unfortunate, or redundant specimens. Such a breeding-based policy of society's salvation, Huxley feared, could be pursued by a despotic government, especially "a collective despotism, a mob" convinced in its "own divine right by demagogic missionaries."[212]

The betterment of mankind could undoubtedly be achieved, he admitted, through appropriate education and the adaptation of living conditions to higher needs.

> But, so long as he remains liable to error, intellectual or moral; so long as he is compelled to be perpetually on guard against the cosmic forces, whose ends are not his ends, without and within himself; so long as he is haunted by inexpugnable memories and hopeless aspirations ; so long as the recognition of his intellectual limitations forces him to acknowledge his incapacity to penetrate the mystery of existence; the prospect of attaining untroubled happiness, or of a state which can, even remotely, deserve the title of perfection, appears to me to be as misleading an illusion as ever was dangled before the eyes of poor humanity. And there have been many of them.

If this be the case, what remains is "a constant struggle to maintain and improve, in opposition to the State of Nature, the State of Art of an organized polity, capable of maintaining and constantly improving itself, until the evolution of our globe shall have entered so far upon its download course that the cosmic process resumes its sway; and, once more, the State of Nature prevails over the surface of our planet."[213]

Huxley's essay, proclaiming the moral sovereignty of man, his ability to be independent of natural determinants, was seen as a deviation and weakness by adherents of utilitarian evolutionist ethics. And, quite expectedly, eugenicists launched a strong counterattack.[214]

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212 Ibidem, pp. 22–23, 37, and passim.

213 Ibidem, pp. 44–45; cf. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, pp. 344–345.

214 James Paradis, "Evolution and Ethics in Its Victorian Context", in James Paradis and George Christopher Williams (eds.), *Thomas Henry Huxley. Evolution and Ethics*, Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 42–48.

The eugenic movement was on the rise. The year 1869, when Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius* was first edited, can be regarded as its modest start. The book was motivated by a rather simple thought. Metropolitan industrial civilisation poses a challenge to which the evolutional mechanism of natural selection can no longer rise, as the adaptive ability of human nature proves disproportionately less than the present-day speed and scale of change in living conditions requires. This disparity brings on ominous effects, as attested by the numerous tribes in North America or Australia perishing owing to their inability to adapt to the demands of the civilisation superimposed on them by the European settlers. Yet, the European race, though obviously much better equipped, is also "over-weighted" and threatened with degeneration, the symptoms of which are easily identifiable in industrial urban hubs. Meanwhile, the adaptive opportunities of any race and the developmental perspectives of the civilisation it has created are primarily dependent on the number of highly intelligent and competent people it produces, and these qualities are, of course, hereditary, which Galton, with the help of his compilation of the genealogies of British judges, scientists, poets, musicians, painters, famous commanders, politicians, theologians, and, in addition, oarsmen and wrestlers, endeavours to prove on several hundred pages. The genealogical tables are there to show that as a general rule, entire families are uncommonly rich in talents. Thus, such families ought to be induced to produce a large number of offspring, whereas those where there is a presence of mental, physical, or moral impairment should be discouraged from procreation.[215]

Not only families but entire races tend to differ in abilities and skills, though. On the ten-grade A-to-J scale Galton proposed for the purpose of his argument, the ancient Athenians scored the highest; they did, however, undergo a quick degeneration – a moral one, followed by racial and intellectual degeneration – after their glory days to the great detriment of mankind. African Negroes were rated the lowest, averaging two grades lower than "our race" (meaning "modern Europeans," if not, at times, just the "Anglo-Saxons"). "If we could raise the average standard of our race only one grade, what vast changes would be produced! The number of men of natural gifts equal to those of the eminent men of the present day, would be necessarily increased more than tenfold, because there would be 2,423 of them in each million instead of only 233."[216]

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215 Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Laws and Consequences*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1869, especially pp. 344–350.

216 Ibidem, pp. 337–343.

Such family histories and statistical calculations impressed his contemporaries, who were by no means naïve, with its greatly scientific methodology. Beatrice Webb, who thanks to her father's connexions made acquaintance in her younger years with the greatest celebrities in British science, recalled that it was Francis Galton – rather than Huxley, Tyndall, Lubbock, or even Herbert Spencer, a friend of her family – who personified the ideal scholar in her eyes. Apart from his personal charm, erudition, and talent, he had, as she puts it, "the capacity for correcting and verifying his own hypotheses, by the statistical handling of masses of data, whether collected by himself or supplied by other students of the problem."[217]

Although Galton's first publications aroused no broad interest, his great scientific enthusiasm, combined with his sense of the great mission to preserve and increase the biological potential of the race, drew a growing number of followers to the movement, which its initiator christened with a name derived from the Greek *eugenes* (i.e., well-born). Having rejected the laissez-faire in favour of an active population policy, the movement was connected, tellingly, for a long time with the broadly defined social reform camp and enjoyed strong support from the Fabian Society, while it was opposed, above all, by religious conservatives.[218]

Galton's ability to verify his own hypotheses, which Mrs. Webb recalled, has not left a significant trace. In his 1892 foreword to a new edition of *Hereditary Genius*, Galton expressed satisfaction with the fact that the idea to improve race by way of top-down regulation of fertility had entered the field of practical politics, including colonial policies. He called for further research on the relative ability of various African races to live in industrial civilisation: "It may prove that the Negroes, one and all, will fail as completely under the new conditions as they have failed under the old ones, to submit to the needs of a superior civilization to their own; in this case their races, numerous and prolific as they are, will in course of time be supplanted and replaced by their betters." What was most important was the belief that improvement of the innate talents of future generations of mankind is attainable. The effects of spontaneous evolutionary processes are at times beneficial and at times adverse; it is humanity's task to give them the desired direction. "It is earnestly to be hoped that inquiries will be increasingly directed into historical facts, with the view of estimating the possible effects of reasonable political action in the future, in gradually raising the present

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217 Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, pp. 134–135.
218 Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 131–134; Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, p. 198.

miserably low standard of the human race to one in which the Utopias in the dreamland of philanthropists may become practical possibilities."[219]

It was precisely this combination of utopia with an ideology of husbandry that perturbed Huxley, who easily discerned the horror of the authority to decree the usefulness of individuals, families, and races in the hands of a selector, or culler. It is true that the eugenicists declared a *sui generis* humanitarianism, for the time being. How infectious this style of thinking was may be testified by the fact that Leslie Stephen, a historian of ideas and one of the most sapient British minds of the time, argued in his critical review of *Evolution and Ethics* that, given the restricted resources and living space, the rivalry of races is not antithetical to morality, while progress depends on pursuing the struggle with use of the most civilised means possible: "We give inferior races a chance of taking whatever place they are fit for, and try to supplant them with the least possible severity if they are unfit for any place."[220]

It was only in the last years of the century that the delayed fame of the treatise *On the inequality of human races* by Arthur de Gobineau reached England, via Germany; the count's teachings were just perfect for the more radical wing of the eugenicists. An extraordinary concept of this underestimated poet and false aristocrat, who traced his lineage back to the Vikings, was that the originally optimistic Aryan myth could be turned against Europe. The initial function of the myth was to scientifically legitimise the Indo-Europeans' contempt for inferior races. According to Gobineau, however, *every* race carries annihilation in its womb, for the blending of the races of conquerors and defeated, of lords and slaves, inevitably leads to degeneration. Race is the only source of *vitalité*, the life-force, which seeps out when bloods are mixed. The history of modern Europe has been a struggle between the remains of the original Germanic-Aryan aristocracy that had once created mediaeval civilisation and the disreputable bourgeoisie, representing no genuine values. The bourgeoisie has temporarily prevailed, but as the blood of Aryans gets increasingly diluted through racial adultery, the fateful end of the degenerated White race draws near. Beginning with 1848, every political event satisfied the sweet certainty, based on scientific premises, of the forthcoming final catastrophe of the hated world, and no moral revival could

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219 Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Laws and Consequences*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1914, pp. XX–XXVII.

220 Quoted after: Paradis and Williams (eds.), *Thomas Henry Huxley. Evolution and Ethics*, p. 47; see also: Jeffrey Paul von Arx, *Progress and Pessimism: Religion, Politics, and History in Late Nineteenth Century Britain,* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 207–208.

prevent this impending disaster, since the race's vital energy and the size of the civilisation had absolutely nothing to do with morality, let alone with Christian ethics for the meek and humble. An avalanche of Chinese and Slavs, Gobineau prophesied at the turn of the eighties in the preface to a new edition of his treatise, with an admixture of Tatars and Baltic Germans, will put an end to European civilisation.[221]

The marriage of the biological myth of race and romanticist antibourgeois cultural resentment was to become in Europe a plenteous source of catastrophic phantasms, among which, *nota bene*, the variant of a Slavic invasion (clearly a reflex of the fear of Russia), was quite frequent, sometimes evoking associations with the spectre of a new Genghis Khan. In order, however, to measure the strength and urgency of such fantasies, the influence psychiatry had exerted on thinking about society and culture should be taken into consideration. It was, after all, the French clinician Bénédict Morel who created, or at least popularised in Europe a medical model of degeneration – his main contribution being his 1857 *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine*. This was a great discovery, judging by the number of treatises, medical and other, published in the years preceding the First World War that mentioned *dégénérescence* or *Entrartung* in their title.[222]

Admittedly, it was never made clear whether *degeneration*, understood as such, was a primary medical classification, or rather, the cause of a variety of afflictions and deviations, such as cretinism, hysteria, neurasthenia, claustrophobia, masturbation, pederasty, impotence, alcoholism, syphilis, and dozens of others.[223] Whatever the case, the concept contributed to the theory of a hereditary predisposition for what were considered symptoms of psycho-medical and moral pathology. In other words, any deviations from the socially accepted norms of health and decency were regarded as the effects of hereditarily transmitted physical and neurological deficiencies.

221 Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 58–67; see also: Gilman, "Political Theory", p. 190; Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, pp. 51–55.

222 Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 20; Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic*, London and Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1975, p. 22.

223 Ibidem, pp. 7–8, 15; Sander L. Gilman, "Sexology, Psychoanalysis, and Degeneration", in Edward J. Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (eds.), *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 88; Robert A. Nye, "Degeneration, Neurasthenia and the Culture of Sport in *Belle Époque* France", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, no. 1, January 1982: pp. 51–68.

The medical concept of *degenerate* has built a respectable career in criminology, mainly owing to Cesare Lombroso. His *L'uomo delinquente* (1876), translated into many languages, became one of the works that shaped the language of the intellectual discourse of enlightened European and American elites, as well as the popular press. The Italian pathologist's studies, larded with anthropological measurements and statistical calculations, gained scientific legitimacy, and his famous albums all the more readily convinced the layman, who found it nice to be reassured that criminals usually were hereditarily marked and physiognomically recognisable, and thus represent, as it were, a separate species. Once could learn from Lombroso, and see it for themselves in the pictures provided, that, for instance, a thief's nose would normally be curved, flattened, or concave, his complexion pale or yellow; the eyes of compulsive murderers were "cold, glassy, immovable, and bloodshot, the nose aquiline, and always voluminous […] Strong jaws, long ears, broad cheek-bones, scanty beard, strongly developed canines, thin lips […]."[224] As in physiognomy, the psychopath's psychical system clearly displays an atavistic regression to primordial, wild, if not animal characteristics, remainders of long-ago completed evolutionary stages.

The influence of educational and environmental conditions on the formation of criminal personalities could enhance a hereditary predisposition whilst the chances for re-socialisation through the penitentiary system were, quite clearly, infinitesimal. Lombroso advised that less menacing criminals be treated rather than punished and recommended that dangerous criminals be eliminated from society for good.[225]

The medico-eugenic concept of familial degeneration had, therefore, a completely different origin and sense than the accepted possibility of the degeneration of a species (under certain conditions) in evolutionistic theory; however, the moment both propositions went beyond the confines of dispute among specialists – which happened with great ease – they availed themselves of each other or rather merged into one infectious metaphor, stamped with a scientific seal and forcing their way into the sphere of psychological and sociological concepts, and into the language of literature, politics, and journalism.[226] The degeneration metaphor was based upon the then commonly recognised biological concept of man as a being dependent on the action of forces he cannot control. Discovering

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224 Gina Lombroso Ferrero (ed.), *Cesare Lombroso. Criminal Man According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso*, New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1911, pp. 15–24.

225 Ibidem, pp. 175–191; Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 115–119.

226 Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, pp. 7–8; Nye, "Degeneration, Neurasthenia", p. 53.

the animal within man, the wild monster in a civilised and staid citizen, was the job of the naturalistic post-Darwinian *Vulgate*, which Huxley vainly tried to oppose. Literature, with Émile Zola as the genre's pope, became nonetheless populated with formidable figures of hereditary degenerates who had completely surrendered to the power of their criminal instincts, as even Sherlock Holmes, himself a diligent reader of Lombroso, pointed out to Dr Watson. The spectral Mr Hyde resided in the (not-so-well) guarded detention facility of the likeable Dr Jekyll, and in the evenings would slip out of his confines.[227]

Nevertheless, if degeneration was used to explain disfavoured sexual behaviours, infertility, hysteria and melancholy, alcoholism and prostitution, anarchism and criminal offences, and whatever else, then the word cries out for being used to stigmatise not only individuals or families, but entire social classes where these disturbing symptoms occur with significant intensity. And that is expectedly what happened, but this also made room for dispute between the doom of hereditability and the theory of the degenerating impact of the environment. The French psychiatric school was inclined to believe that both factors were capable of working in tandem. In a tract significantly titled *Dégénérescence et criminalité: Essai physiologique* (1888), Charles Feré argued that the unhealthy and restless conditions of big-city life overwhelm the nervous systems of weaker individuals from the lower social classes, making them unstable and, therefore, capable of the most wanton acts. "The impotent, the mad, criminals or decadents of every form, must be considered as the waste-matter of adaptation, the invalids of civilization [...] general utility cannot accommodate the survival of the unproductive."[228] Henry Maudsley, the authority in English psychiatry, proposed no less arbitrary concepts, mutually associating sexual deviations (which stood for any behaviour not aimed at procreation), mental disorders, and susceptibility to socialist canvassing.[229]

This is how the natural sciences provided hard arguments for the prosecution in the ever-lasting trial against the metropolis, factory, and materialism, or, at least, provided a rationalisation for the decent burgher's fear of something menacing and dark creeping in the narrow streets, slums, and pubs of those bad neighbourhoods better avoided. Those who had to venture into such areas – physicians, sanitary inspectors, social researchers, philanthropists – were always finding new evidence, particularly statistical, to prove, for instance, that three

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227   Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1886.

228   Quoted after: Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 32.

229   Ibidem, 212–213.

generations at most could survive in East London, each subsequent generation being of even paler complexion, smaller heads (sic) and ever more sunken chests. The fourth generation would already be degenerated to a degree rendering it incapable of life. Such diagnoses and forecasts were not necessarily accusations of capitalist exploitation; for example, the author of the 1885 study, *Degeneration amongst Londoners*, regarded the lack of ozone in London's air to be the main cause of decrepitude among labourers.[230]

The reasons identified by the researchers varied, but the outcome, though not at all confirmed, remained the same. There was a firm conviction that London, poor as it was, remained more or less vigorous and fit thanks to the constant inflow of a physically and morally sounder element from the countryside, even though statistical evidence regarding this question was highly uncertain. In any case, a conscientious researcher of the matter was of the opinion that "the theory of urban degeneration bore little relation to the real situation of the London casual poor in the late Victorian period." But the said theory was part of the stereotypical image of the city held by middle class city dwellers. In their eyes, the "countryside had symbolized the forces of simplicity, strength, phlegm, loyalty and deference [to the upper classes]." In the city, these village virtues would turn into their opposites within a generation or two.[231]

London's East End attracted the particular attention of social and medical diagnosticians in the last quarter of the century. Many of them differentiated "the respectable working class," with a more or less regular income based on permanent employment and relatively decent morals, from "casual labourers" or the "casual poor," living day to day on temporary jobs (especially at the docks) or on charity, in other words, England's effluvium, a collection of the dregs of society, to whom religion, property, or morality is alien. That *residuum*, as they were sometimes called, the mob of paupers and criminals, "outcast London," the "city of the damned" from George Gissing's novel, aroused at times compassion but more often disgust and fear. It was an ever-renewing argument in support of the identification of the City as the source of moral and physical degeneration, which, worse still, could also affect decent workers when facing sudden the loss of employment in a time of crisis, such as the 1884–1887 depression.[232] Every demonstration of workers, not to say jobless workers, in the squares of London,

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230 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: a Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992, pp. 127–128.

231 Ibidem, pp. 150–151; Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 213.

232 Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 261, 284–288; Philip J. Waller, *Town, City, and Nation: England, 1850–1914*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 47.

like those in 1886 and 1887, aroused fear in uptown dwellers, as the city, unlike Paris, was unfamiliar with revolutionary agitation. The crude proles demanding labour and, moreover, electoral rights seemed to be some sort of sinister *sans-culottes* or uncivilised tribe. "If we have to strike a balance between the Papuans of New Caledonia and the communities of European beggars and thieves," Edward Tylor observed, "we may sadly acknowledge that we have in our midst something worse than savagery. But it is not savagery ; it is broken-down civilization."[233]

The novelist Richard Jeffries, energised with a similar view, become famous (albeit for a short time) for his futuristic horror novel about an England gone wild (*After London, or Wild England*, 1885). It is not clear exactly what had caused the cataclysm; the ports and estuaries were said to have silted up, the Thames had changed course, brought down bridges, and its waters had washed over London, flushing the metropolis's sewers and cemeteries. Foul and poisonous air rose from the swampy sludge and rubble, turning the whole area of what had been London into a death zone. Other towns and the fertile fields and meadows of England had been affected as well. A coarse people who had in only a few generations lost the entire wealth of knowledge that had been amassed in the nineteenth century wandered the forests; they would at times come across some material remains, rust-eaten wreckages of machines or railway tracks, never knowing what they had been devised for or how they had been manufactured. Years later, around the Great Lake that had formed in central England, small states came into being, despotically ruled by self-proclaimed dukes and predatory barons who had brought most of their population under strict bondage. The states waged endless wars with one another; the Welsh and the Irish were taking revenge on the English for old and long-forgotten wrongs. And it is in this setting of an England set back a thousand years that the novel's love story begins in proper. Its main character is a baron's son who, with the help of three salvaged children's textbooks and his own awesome experiences exploring the *zone*, will try to reconstruct the forgotten history.[234]

Although other literary images and descriptions of London from the century's later years could not rival Jeffries's vision with its passion of destruction, the tone of their descriptions of typical scenes from the poor districts of London differed

233   Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, p. 38; Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform*, p. 257.
234   Richard Jefferies, *After London; or, Wild England*, London: Cassell & Company Ltd, 1885; Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, p. 73.

from those of Dickens's times only in that they were free of sentiment: the country was an alien one, triggering fear rather than compassion.[235]

The discussion on the East End and its quarters of chronic poverty, running on for years, disclosed a deepening split in the British liberal camp. On the one hand, criticism of the doctrine of economic individualism went hand in hand with a sense of responsibility for the historical harm done to the masses, who had been pushed by capitalism to the bottom of existence, and with the conviction that the scale of the phenomenon had surpassed society's ability to self-regulate; hence, the "new liberalism," more proactive than its classical version, supporting activities fostering labour legislation and redevelopment of reasonable social care, and encouraging welfare workers to work directly in the slum quarters. Arnold Toynbee, the Oxford historian and economist, who died a young man, in his famous, posthumously published lectures on the English "industrial revolution" (a term he concocted), as well as in his addresses concerning the situation of labourers, criticised the dogmatism of classical economics as well as the dogmatism of "continental socialism," opting for a reformatory radicalism which aimed at civilising the class conflicts and the market economy by means of the democratic state.[236]

It was possible, however, to draw completely contrasting conclusions and recommendations from quite similar observations. One could assume, for instance, that supporting the eight-hour workday and, at all, the state's intervention in labour relations marked a betrayal of liberal ideals and was, in principle, inefficient as a line of policy.[237] And that was not all – it was an overtly detrimental policy that, by violating the normal conditions of competition, would maintain sick, non-adapted, and degenerated individuals and classes in society, whom natural selection would have otherwise rejected. The reformers ought to rid themselves of their illusions: social welfare and charity do not favour finding a solution to these urgent social issues, as they themselves are the cause. Medical aid, improved sanitary conditions, humanitarian legislation – all of this allows

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235 Alison Hennegan, "Personalities and Principles: Aspects of Literature and Life in *Fin-de-Siècle* England", in Mikulaš Teich and Roy Porter (eds.), *Fin de Siècle and Its Legacy,* Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 196–197.

236 Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the 18th Century in England, Popular Addresses, Notes, and Other Fragments*, New York: The Humboldt Publishing Co. 1884, esp. pp. 145–152, 20–25, 219–221. [Note: the author was a paternal uncle of Arnold Toynbee, the historian of civilisation.] See also: Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 261–264; Crossman, "The Testament of Change", pp. 428–430.

237 von Arx, *Progress and Pessimism*, p. 207.

increasing numbers of non-adapted individuals to reach maturity and issue off-spring. Rather than how to help or support those wretches, one should instead consider how to isolate them from society. The proposed options ranged from evicting the unemployed from London to agricultural labour colonies where the inmates would be treated like convicts, through supporting the migration of the jobless to British colonies, to compulsory sterilisation or to the reinstatement of "work houses" with strict segregation of the sexes in order to prevent procreation.[238]

Adherents of both stances rejected the laissez-faire approach as outmoded and inefficient, but they represented two differing types of social ethos. The radicals doggedly believed that progress was achievable in social relations through the cautious and reasonable intervention of education and law carried out in the spirit of human solidarity – that is, providing equal opportunities to the under-privileged. The social Darwinists and eugenicists, for whom any urban metropolis was an arena of the merciless struggle for existence, allowed for intervention that would support the strong and eliminate the weak, ailing, resourceless, and unfortunate, while cloaking even their most ruthless proposals under the mantle of the authority of science and the common good.[239] In 1900, on the threshold of his career, the young economist Arthur Pigou expressed his view that public opinion ought to be persuaded to sanction the coerced isolation or sterilisation of derelicts. "Proposals of this kind," he added, "appear on the surface to be stern and cruel, but apparent hardness to one generation may turn out to be kindness to the race, when the interests of posterity are duly considered."[240]

As the century's end drew near, that tone of self-assured surgeons preparing cut out the ulcers of society grew more frequent and louder. The problem was, it was becoming apparent that the misery of the "East End" was not the only fruit of the degeneration process. Degenerates were everywhere all around.

Fin de siècle

It is the task of intellectuals to lend history a purpose and direction, meaning and form; to divide it into acts, and to attach a moral script to it. The French had mastered such historical dramaturgy. Their visions of the past were perhaps not as elaborate as the systems of the German philosophy of history, but they did make handsome use of lofty rhetoric. The word *décadence*, used to describe the period

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238   Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 281–314.
239   Ibidem, pp. 328–329; Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 130–131.
240   Quoted after: Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 332.

of decline preceding the final collapse of states and civilisations, was an important entry in their rhetorical dictionary. At first, in line with its traditional use, the notion referred to ancient history; it became popular especially after Montesquieu published his *Considérations sur le grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), which was intended to offer a comparison and a warning for his contemporaries. From that time, the terms decline and/or decadence have been associated with overindulgence, the refined tasting of the pleasures and delights of life, the disappearance of the simplicity of morals and of moral sense. These associations were invoked in Thomas Couture's grand painting, *Les Romains de la décadence*, which drew crowds to the Paris Salon in 1847, probably more eager to fill their eyes with the voluptuous scene of a Roman orgy than ready to read out of it a horrifying warning to France.[241]

Nevertheless, the warning came just in time, although licentiousness was not the main reason for concern. That France had diminished was clear to the republicans, legitimists, and Bonapartists alike. For some, the fall began in 1789, others traced it to the year 1794, and still others would to the years 1815 or 1830; but, who would love the Orleanist France of petit-bourgeois parvenu merchants? The *mediocrité*, the vulgarity of its ideals and interests sickened both romanticists and the conservative enemies of romanticism: in a word, it appalled anyone who had any idea of the grandeur and pathos of history. Orleanism seemed to have been some sort of failed interval, a temporary fall on the road to progress. That is to say, it seemed so in literature, to the authors of novels and their protagonists and to the oversensitive *children of the century*. The 1848 Revolution was their hour, but it was short and unsuccessful. History was losing its rhythm; progress, and belief in it – up to that time obvious, in spite of contradicting expectations with respect to it – revealed its ironical nature. There were various spectres haunting Europe: the spectre of the debauched mob instigated by demagogues and the spectre of reaction that suppresses the freedom of conscience; the spectre of atheism and that of papism.

The idea that the "Latin" races had exhausted their vitality was not only reflected on and penned by Count de Gobineau. Proudhon, the socialist, expected the Germanic nations to soon subjugate Europe; some republicans were haunted by the thought that young Slavonic nations, with Russia at the lead, would flood the foppish West and revive it with their virile energy.[242] It was in as early as 1850

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241 Eugen Weber, "Introduction: Decadence on a private income", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (January 1982): 4.

242 Koenraad W. Swart, *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France,* The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1964, pp. 102–104.

that Claude-Marie Randot published his treatise, *De la décadence de la France* (and Ledru-Rollin published his own *De la decadence de l'Angleterre*). The young Ernest Renan evaluated the situation less emotionally: "*Our century* tends toward neither the *good* nor the bad; it tends toward the mediocre."[243]

The glamour of the Second Empire and its pretences for the renewal of the Napoleonic glory and France's European leadership did not deceive the great portraitists of the period. The careerism of the bourgeoisie, their increasing industrial and financial power, were inconsistent with ideas of the greatness of France and its people. It was as if the economic field of rivalry was of an almost exclusively negative meaning, personifying everything trivial. The enmity between artists and the bourgeoisie seemed to be more obstinate in France than elsewhere, but the scorned *bourgeois* was to some extent a literary creation, essentially stigmatising the entire stabilised society with its everyday bustle, aspirations, and social patterns. This malicious portrait did not, however, serve the purpose of protecting unrecognised traditional values. The most ostentatious criticism of bourgeois culture and the practicality of the bourgeoisie came from the literary avant-garde, whose credo was expanding the boundaries of experience, language, and artistic expression. Thus, one *modernité* clashed against another, fundamentally alien and repugnant to each other.[244] And yet their alienation can sometimes be put in doubt. Eugen Weber, an American historian of French culture, has portrayed the decadent artist of Baudelaire and Flaubert's generation, without spite, as a rentier enjoying a modest but regular income and plenty of free time.[245]

The epithet *le décadent* became a part of the language at that time. Paradoxically, the term came to be attached to those who diagnosed the decadence of French society the most ruthlessly. Baudelaire and Gautier defended themselves against the epithet as long as they could, but ultimately gave up.[246] Thus, art that emphatically transgressed the established conventions of taste, genre, composition, and decency was deemed decadent. But the play of mirrors went on and the accusations were reversible.

What bourgeois critics saw in the literary avant-garde and its sophistication were symptoms of languor, melancholy, a nervous exhaustion with the feverish

243 Quoted after: ibidem, pp. 86, 89, 95, 259 [retranslated from the French].

244 Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1987, p. 5; Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 48–49.

245 Weber, "Introduction: Decadence", pp. 8–9.

246 Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, pp. 114–116.

rhythm of life. The decadents themselves complained not about the excessive intensity of their experiences but about the lack thereof, about the inertia of their surroundings and *ennui*. It was not them, but society which was exhausted, spent, and bereft of energy. "Better barbarism than boredom!" Gautier claimed.[247]

The boredom was broken by the Prussians. *L'année terrible*, the year of Sedan and of the Commune, provided an abundance of experiences. With the unprecedented defeat, so severe and completely unexpected as it was and the atrocities committed by both sides in the civil war, the French felt as though they had fallen to the bottom of history, humiliated and dishonoured. Therefore, they started looking for the reasons of the collapse. At that time, *decadence* was a somewhat worn-out word, which more commonly referred to literature and the arts than to the condition of the state. *Degeneration* seemed more emphatic. The medical and criminological history of the term has been discussed above. In as early as in the sixties, there were suggestions that the French *en masse* were, perhaps, experiencing a physical degeneration.[248] In 1871, concerns were expressed that the nation, great as it had once been, had also been afflicted with a moral degeneration. *La France dégénérée* could be found on the bookshelf alongside a dozen of other self-critical treatises such as *Des causes de la décadence française* or *La fin du monde latin*.[249] The term *dégénérescence* would remain part of the French political vocabulary for at least three decades.

As the Third Republic stabilised its constitutional order and secured material wellbeing, its writers, journalists, and professors began to regain self-assurance and belief in their country. The period of stabilisation was not smooth, as is known. It was interrupted time and again by great corruption and political affairs which the scandal sheets preyed on like vultures lunging at carrion. The world's second republican democracy was showing its less appetising side, and many a sworn Bonapartist began yearning for the alluring years of the Second Empire.[250]

Progress in many domains of life – be it industry or education, medicine or the judiciary – was undeniable, and its doctrine was part of the popular canon of public and patriotic consciousness. Each year yielded some fascinating novelties that would prove useful in everyday life. It is not so easy for us, jaded (if not blasé) as we are by today's technological advances, to imagine the transformation in lifestyle streetlights and illuminated apartments brought about, or how

247   Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, p. 50.
248   Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 11, 248; Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 97.
249   Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, pp. 124, 223, 233.
250   Ibidem, pp. 142–143.

revolutionary the changes in feminine lingerie could have been, or the admiration inspired by Pasteur's discoveries, transcontinental railroads, or the explorations of Africa's interior. Modernity paved the way to exotic lands, stimulated the imagination, and was attractive with its mirage of amazing and incredible adventures. Should we need a clear symbol of enchantment with the magnificent race of the epoch, the career of the stage adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* is apt. The gigantic show, which was a pioneering achievement of theatrical technology by the standards of its time, was performed at the Paris theatre 1,550 times during the twenty-five years between 1874 and 1898.[251]

In spite of these fascinations with modern novelties, a dark current in culture – one of doubt and concern – intensified and abated by turns, but was never to disappear. It fed, in a sense, on those same novelties but regarded them as unhealthy. The psychological structure of human beings, its exponents reasoned, was not ready or adapted for such an excess of stimuli, incessant change, and uncertainty about what tomorrow might bring. This conviction was shared at least by those authors who had a penchant for delving into states of nervous oversensitivity and detected in them symptoms of civilisation-related disease. "Take a closer look at our contemporary literature," Émile Zola wrote, "and you shall see in it all the symptoms of the neurosis that is convulsing our age; it is, directly, a product of our anxieties, our acrid debates [orig., *de nos recherces âpres*] and fears; in a word, of the entire deficiency our blind societies are experiencing in the face of the unknown tomorrow."[252] Similarly, Edmond de Goncourt asked whether the underlying reasons for the age's melancholy and sorrow are "the overburdening, the movement, the extraordinary effort, the furious labour, the straining of the intellect till it nearly breaks down, and overproduction in every sphere."[253]

There were more such diagnoses, psychological and sociological, according to which the blind drive of civilised mankind into the unknown was seen as a sort of diabolical obsession that would bring about the fall of religion, morality, health, and social order. French and German doctors warned that cases of nervous exhaustion and a premature weariness of life were increasingly frequent, especially in young people. Enrico Ferri, their Italian colleague, wrote that mental

251 Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, p. 164.

252 Émile Zola, *Mes haines*; quoted after: Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 338 [retranslated from the French].

253 Ibidem. Cf. Paolo Rossi, *Naufragi senza spettatore: l'idea di progresso*, Milano: Il Mulino, 1995, pp. 115–118.

illnesses, suicides, and crimes were replacing the typhoid fever, smallpox, and cholera that fortunately had been defeated by science.[254]

Such diagnoses, combined with the social Darwinism that was in vogue at the time, translated into fatalistic forecasts of the collapse of the weary *Latin race* or of the neurasthenic upper classes, implying that social evolution – as was found, for instance, by the anthropologist Vacher de Lapouge – led backwards rather than forward.[255] The future, not a distant one, was to belong to the masses, the crowds, words which, even to a larger degree than in England, signalled the disturbing potential of an element which was alien to anything subtle and rational. France did know a bit about crowds, and this knowledge was not purely academic. Even among leftist intellectuals, their private obsessions and fears were at times in conflict with their political convictions.[256]

Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (*Psychologie des Foules*, 1895) was ideally aimed at the expectations and phobias of the time, and not only among the French reading public. This talented dilettante, using a suggestive style, dramatically presented the civilisational upheaval of his times as a mortal struggle between *the soul of the crowd* and *the soul of the race*. There are no specific anthropological traits ascribed to race in Le Bon; for him race is, rather, an ethnic tribalism. We can learn, for instance, that "the different races represented in France are still far from being completely blended." All the same, race, however vaguely defined, "dominates all the feelings and all the thoughts of men": its soul is collective, with characteristics of mentality and sensibility inherited from one generation to the next, bestowing on a civilisation its inalienable character. The fates of every nation, its beliefs, ideas, institutions, forms of government, are all conditional upon its racial character and no revolution has been capable of changing this.[257] At present, however, the transformation taking place is quite unique, as all the religious dogmas, social and political views and ideas upon which "our civilisation" was founded have fallen. On the groundwork of the new living conditions triggered by the discoveries of science and industrial success, an epoch of the "anarchy of minds" has arrived, the old authorities and pillars of public life having fallen. There is only one force that has not ceased

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254   Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, pp. 11–12, 20–21; Nye, "Degeneration, Neurasthenia", p. 58; Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, pp. 11, 14.

255   Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, p. 157.

256   Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, pp. 152–153.

257   Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1896, pp. XIII–XIV, 39–40, 72–83, 167–168.

growing, absorbing all the others: the crowd – and the approaching century will be *the era of crowds*.[258]

In Le Bon's view, rather than limited to its colloquial meaning, *la foule* is a much broader concept: thus, a crowd could be any collective action, organised or elemental, concentrated or dispersed. The choice of the term was not without reason, since impulsive and irrational motivators and purposes are most easily ascribable to a crowd. Rather than by its own interests, a crowd is driven by unconscious, atavistic instincts. Although anarchy is its element, it could be easily motivated and controlled by fanatical apostles or cunning demagogues who, knowing the magical power of words and slogans, are capable of swaying the crowd's soul. And he who controls their souls is the most threatening despot; such power was held by the founders of great religions, certain leaders, and today (in Le Bon's time), the prophets of socialism.[259]

The crowd surrenders itself to simplified ideas and opinions and, in turn, becomes a dictator itself; its control extends to the press, which rather than shaping public opinion, flatters it. Additionally, a governments' policies are also driven by the impulses and sentiments of the crowd.[260] But how and why the authority of the crowd would eventually undermine civilisation is not completely clear in Le Bon, although it is his central argument. As is made apparent, the crowd itself bears the hallmark of a race, as does the civilisation which gave birth to it. Hence, the *Roman* crowd, which always refers to the state authority, is completely different from its *Anglosaxon* counterpart, which "sets no store on the State, and only appeals to private initiative." In a word, "The genius of the race, then, exerts a paramount influence upon the dispositions of a crowd." What is more, on one hand, we are informed that many times in history brutal and barbarian crowds destroyed civilisations whose existence relies, after all, on "fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state." But on the other hand, we are told that: "It is not by reason, but most often in spite of it, that are created those sentiments that are the mainsprings of all civilization – sentiments such as honour, self-sacrifice, religious faith, patriotism, and the love of glory." Finally, the author emphasises that the crowd is instinctually conservative, and hence, their "fetish-like respect for all traditions is absolute; their unconscious horror of all novelty capable of changing the essential conditions of their existence is very deeply rooted."[261]

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258   Ibidem, pp. XIV–XV, and passim.
259   Ibidem, pp. 11–12, 36–42, 117–146, 153–154.
260   Ibidem, pp. 159–163.
261   Ibidem, pp. XVIII–XX, 21, 39–42, 116, 167–168.

While theoretical coherence was quite clearly not the greatest asset of the Le Bon study, it nonetheless appeared in countless editions and translations, becoming one of the most popular European books in the last decade of the century. The concepts it proposed – those *souls of race* and *instincts of the crowd* – reflected and confirmed the style of language of the anti-positivist breakthrough. Le Bon's observations concerning the susceptibility of mass movements to the demagogy of leaders were astute, and their significance exceeded the common experience of an observer of the Third Republic's crises. His gloomy forecast of the fall of the West joined the wave of similar prophecies which was surging in Europe at the time.

Interestingly, however, Le Bon's final scenario of this collapse does not feature the crowd as its perpetrator. In his forecast, democracy transforms into the rule of an impersonal caste of officials, eager to regulate every single domain of life by means of an ever-growing number of regulations, thus expanding their scope of rule whilst step by step depriving defenceless citizens of their freedom, self-reliance, and initiative. "The State becomes an all-powerful god. Still experience shows that the power of such gods was never very durable or very strong." A government of this sort is a sign of decrepitude, the hallmark of a decline that no civilisation has so far managed to avoid. In fact, after having achieved a certain degree of structural complexity, the process of ossification sets in: "The hour of its old age has struck."

"This inevitable hour," Le Bon continues, "is always marked by the weakening of the ideal that was the mainstay of the race. In proportion as this ideal pales all the religious, political, and social structures inspired by it begin to be shaken." Character is warped; the ability to act disinterestedly disappears. The nation loses its cohesiveness as "this collective egoism of the race is replaced by an excessive development of the egoism of the individual," and turns into a loose assemblage of mutually antagonised individuals incapable of governing themselves, and thus demanding direction "in their pettiest acts, and that the State exerts an absorbing influence." In brief, the nation becomes the crowd. But how about civilisation? "Its civilisation is now without stability, and at the mercy of every chance. The populace is sovereign, and the tide of barbarism mounts. The civilisation may still seem brilliant because it possesses an outward front, the work of a long past, but it is in reality an edifice crumbling to ruin, which nothing supports, and destined to fall in at the first storm."[262]

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262 Ibidem, pp. 224–230.

Thus, similarly as in the classic interpretation of the fall of Rome, barbarians – democratic rule, in this case – are merely the factor enforcing the historical catastrophe caused by the inescapable internal logic of the life cycle of any civilisation.[263] France, coincidentally, was the first to have entered this final phase, the phase of decay, and Europe would be following in its wake.

Were not the bombings that had started in the early nineties in Europe and in America foreshadowing this breakdown? The anarchists were not many in number, but they did manage to alarm and thrill the European imagination as mad and saintly criminals, rejecting all the institutions of the hated oppressive society: faith and tradition, army and school, property and the law. The bombs planted by Ravachol and his comrades and the dagger of the Italian Caserio, President Sadi Carnot's assassin in 1894, shook the Republic and seemed to challenge the state and bourgeois order.[264] Later, *L'Affaire* delivered an even more efficient jolt. The central character of Zola's serial-novel *Paris*, a chemist, inventor, and idealist, fantasised that he would blow up the Sacré Coeur basilica to terrorise the people and afterwards destroy Europe's armies, thereby ensuring lasting world peace.[265] It seems that the public, or perhaps a part of it, delighted in such shivers of terror.

It was the French who thought up the phrase – "the end of the century." The phrase first appeared in the mid-1880s, and soon afterwards, books, plays, and essays featuring "*fin-de-siècle*" or "*decadence*" in their titles were everywhere. Both terms stood for more or less the same thing: the twilight of the epoch, disappearing ideals, the atrophy of will (the *maladie du siècle*), a refined culture past its prime. *Être fin-de-siècle* meant to feel alien in the world, to reject its restraining conventions, but rather as an expression of fatigue than one of rebellion.[266]

To what extent this was an affectation, dandyism, imitation of a fashionable lifestyle, or perhaps, authentically endured pessimism – who could judge? We cannot really say for sure how one or another philosophical or religious mood spreads, why it appears, and why it recedes. It was at the turn of the 1880s that Paul Bourget tested the waters of the stream of despair flowing through literature; he did not accept the conviction that this was only a temporary reflex to social upheavals. As he put it,

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263   Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology*, pp. 50–77.

264   Daniel Grinberg, *Ruch anarchistyczny w Europie Zachodniej 1870–1914*, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1994, pp. 232–235.

265   Ibidem, p. 71; Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, pp. 115–120.

266   Ibidem, pp. 9–11, 247–248; Schwartz, *Century's End*, pp. 159–161.

> It seems more plausible to me that melancholy ought to be recognised as the inevitable effect of discord between our needs as civilised people and the reality that surrounds us; all the more so that from one end of Europe to the other, contemporary society presents the same symptoms of melancholy and dysfunction, inflected by the nuances of race. A universal nausea about the inadequacies of the world permeates the hearts of Slavs, Germans, and Latins [*des Latins*] alike. Among the first, it is manifested in the guise of nihilism, among the second in pessimism, and among us, in solitary and bizarre forms of hysteria. The murderous rage of the conspirators of St. Petersburg, the books of Schopenhauer, the furious conflagrations of the Commune, and the fierce misanthropy of the naturalistic novel I intentionally choose the most widely separated examples all reveal this same spirit of negation of life which darkens more each day our western civilisation.[267]

In Bourget's view, literature reflects and shapes the moral atmosphere of the epoch. The independence of words and the independence of individuals, meaning the decomposition of language and the decomposition of society, are for him aspects of one process, the result of the same emptiness and lassitude that has overwhelmed the *European races* after having attained education and a relatively comfortable standard of living, but having lost their old faith and ability to be happy.[268] While Bourget wrote his essay with the intent to defend Baudelaire and the artistic elitism of the decadents, he described the spiritual loss much more expressively than their poetic achievement.[269]

Anatole Baju, leader of the French decadent poets and editor of *Le Décadent*, put it even more explicitly (1886): "It would be an apex of insanity to hide the truth about the state of decay we are experiencing. Religion, morals, justice – all is deteriorating, lost and fallen. […] Society is getting decomposed, corrosively affected by the wicked civilisation."[270] Such diagnoses, no doubt, tell us more about the state of mind of the diagnosticians than about the society they refer

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267 Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine (Baudelaire – m. Renan – Flaubert – m. Taine – Stendhal),* Paris: A. Lemerre, 1890, pp. 14–15. [The English rendering is compiled with use of the translated excerpts found in: Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia. Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009; and, Vida Dutton Scudder, *The Life of the Spirit in the Modern English Poets*, Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895 – editions or fragments thereof available through the World Wide Web.]

268 Ibidem, pp. 16–32; Calinescu, *Five Faces*, pp. 169–171; Teresa Walas, *Ku otchłani (dekadentyzm w literaturze polskiej 1890–1905)*, Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986, pp. 20–23, 267.

269 Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, pp. 162–163.

270 Quoted after: Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson, London: Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 382 [re-translated from the French].

to. Mores and morals, as we know, are always in decline, and that they might be improving is a rare thing to hear. Civilisation was probably not more wicked in the late nineteenth century than ever before, let alone afterwards. The association of the decadent sentiments with the epoch's intellectual adventures seems hard to deny. Religious doubt and laicisation have already been mentioned, trends that took a more acute course in France than in England. The reformative potential of liberalism was also clearly nearly exhausted, revealing increasingly more explicit conservative tendencies. French national pride was severely wounded, and the hopes of the socialists remained unfulfilled. The scientific worldview, particularly in its positivist version, left a sense of emptiness, a metaphysical void, and more and more often provoked averse reactions. Although the notion had long been mercilessly abused, the crisis of values appeared unquestionable and severe. One can repeat after the Polish scholar of decadence that it was simultaneously a crisis of ideology, truth, and ethics, and "these three were crowned by the crisis of faith."[271]

"We have eaten an apple from the tree of knowledge, and the apple has turned to ashes in our mouth […] It was sweet to believe, even in hell" These were the words of the libertine, Anatole France, in an article meaningfully entitled "*Pourquoi sommes-nous tristes?*" (1895).[272] Many an intellectual would soon regain faith, hope, and a sense of meaning, some by finding their way to the Church again, others through Bergson's philosophy, or perhaps, in a patriotic revival or revolutionary movement, or in communities inspired by a common spirit and engaging the entire minds of its followers. The decadent movement found its place at moment of time when deep faith was hard to cultivate or sustain, so what remained was to watch as the rotten world blindly raced into the abyss. One could even relish such a vision, perversely delight in prophesising catastrophe; additionally, one's own sorrow and fashionable *ennui* could be interpreted as visible symptoms of the palsy of crisis.[273] The end of the century exquisitely suited associations with the strongly sensed twilight of the epoch, the decline of France, and the end of the world (although this last had been continually foretold for two thousand years). The symbolism of the arithmetic calendar once again invaded the collective imagination, or perhaps, conversely, it was called forth.

All of this was more vivid in France. The British Isles saw a less expressive form of *fin de siècle*. In any case, England had not suffered revolutionary

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271 Walas, *Ku otchłani*, p. 170.

272 Quoted after: Chadwick, *The Secularization*, pp. 255, 279.

273 Walas, *Ku otchłani*, pp. 46–47; Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, pp. 161–170; John Clark, *La pensée de Ferdinand Brunetière*, Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1954, p. 165.

upheaval or military defeat in the century nearing its end; the country's industry and fleet were without equal all over the world, and the Empire was at the height of its glory. The recurring commercial and financial crises could be cause for concern, but the country's overall condition did not justify alarmist apprehensions. Hence, more than anywhere else in Europe, it was evident in England that cultural crisis was not necessarily a reflection of the state's weaknesses. On the contrary, it could even be a response to the state's prosperity. Arnold's dire warnings, Ruskin's thunder, or Morris's curses were anchored in the fundamental dissimilarity between their ethical and social ideals and the everyday realities of capitalism.

English decadents, or rather, as they were called – aesthetes – sensed this strangeness no less intensively; some even considered Ruskin their master, but unlike the great cultural critics, they did not want to reform or educate society, they desired only that the philistine society which they so scorned leave them in peace and not attempt to impose on them its own canons of morality, utility, and beauty. Their own most sacred canon was to cultivate individuality, thus denying all others. The task was not an easy one. Beginning with Walter Pater, the Oxford art historian whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (or, simply, *The Renaissance*) was a cult book for the Aesthetic Movement, the poetic figure of the "solitary prisoner" appears a number of times, he absorbs and experiences the world with all his senses but is able to share his ephemeral vision with no-one, as it cannot be expressed in language: "'Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without."[274]

Such isolation is obviously impossible; what is the very act of publishing one's poetry or exhibiting one's paintings, if not the breaking of that isolation or a desperate attempt to make contact and communicate? Celebrating one's loneliness and otherness is, rather, the eternal romantic means of intensifying expression – or breaking through the walls of the cell. Pater, Dante Gabriel Rosetti, as well as the younger Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, and others from the poetic Symbolist clan seemed to be aware of the ambivalence of the prisoner who simultaneously seeks to shelter himself from the world and to expose himself to it. They found shelter in art, poetry, history, fantasy, and in their

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274 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, London & New York: Macmillan and Co., 1888, pp. 248; Barbara Charlesworth, *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965, p. XV.

own inner lives, but a passionate need for faith and human community shined through their masks of irony, *ennui*, and emotional coldness.[275]

This duality is striking in the writings of Oscar Wilde – the author whose personality and output uniquely left a mark on the English turn of the century. With his characteristic perverse desire to provoke Victorian society, Wilde declared an artist's complete indifference towards any ethical considerations or social expectations regarding art, which was for him, as for all the Aesthetes, an axiologically sovereign sphere.[276]

What put him off from Ruskin, whom Wilde had admired in his youth, was precisely the fact that the aesthetics of the author of *The Stones of Venice* had always been subject to ethics.[277] *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, Wilde's ideological manifesto, contains a defence of the independence of art, which degenerates and becomes vulgar whenever there are attempts to dictate rules for it, or whenever art itself desires to endear itself to the public. The public hates new things as they elude its censorship and are an expression of the sovereignty of the artist who despises the *slavery of custom*. Genuine poets and writers were, in most cases, "solemnly conferred diplomas of immorality" by the English public, or the public considered their works to be morbid.[278]

This proclamation of a spiritual aristocratism was, however, only a part of his individualistic manifesto, an outright a hymn in praise of man's freedom, though a freedom clearly lined with an ethical ideal. Christ's commandment, Wilde reasoned, was to "know thyself," to give the germs of excellence concealed in your soul the chance to develop. Individualism demands nothing from man: "It does not try to force people to be good. It knows that people are good when they are let alone." "Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live," or thinking for oneself, "it is asking others to live as one wishes to live." Individualism fosters respect for diversity, sympathy for people and compassion – "not with life's sores and maladies

275 Ibidem, passim; Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, pp. 91–92; Niemojowska, *Zapisy zmierzchu*, pp. 253, 346–382.

276 Introduction to: Oscar Wilde, *Portret Doriana Graya*, trans. Maria Feldmanowa, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1971, pp. 5–6; Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life*, p. 210; Williams, *Culture and Society*, pp. 173–174.

277 Charlesworth, *Dark Passages*, p. 58.

278 Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism, The Socialist Ideal-Art and The Coming Solidarity*, New York: The Humboldt Publishing Co., [1891], pp. 17–20.

merely, but with life's joy and beauty and energy and health and freedom." This is the direction the law of evolution has set for the mankind to follow.[279]

Quite unexpectedly, the manifesto reveals Wilde's relation with Mill, in spite of their entirely dissimilar language. Reappearing in various philosophical guises, the sentiment that normative control of the social environment is an insufferable tyranny and opposing it in the name of the right to freely develop one's individuality has always been an important thread in English culture. Wilde's accusation extended to the economic system, convinced that private property, responsible for the misery and humiliation of millions, posed the main obstacle on evolution's road to individualism. Property crushes individualism also in the moneyed classes, since amassing and possessing goods as a life goal does not allow for joy in life and developing one's individual independence. Thus, Wilde considered the abolishment of property as a precondition of unrestrained development.[280]

Wilde's socialism obviously bore an anarchistic stamp. He argued that a socialism combining economic and political power would turn out to be even more oppressive than the present state of affairs. The state ought to be a voluntary association of producers and a distributor of products, and once and for all quit the idea of governing people. "High hopes were once formed of democracy; but democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people."[281]

There is no need to point out the naïve traits of this utopia. Designing social reform and fomenting revolution were not Wilde's intention, in any case. It is worthwhile, however, to see in him the zealous defender of human rights – against any and all forms of bondage. That he was eager to influence public opinion is doubtless, as is the fact that his effectiveness in this respect was admirably high, given his decadent approach. The international acclaim and renown Wilde's plays, novels, and provocations enjoyed surpassed anything that British literature had seen since Byron's time. After all, it clearly became apparent, once again, that contempt demonstrated with respect to public tastes and conventions or etiquette was not the worst means to arouse the public's interest, if not fascination.[282] The bourgeois public enjoyed seeing social taboos violated and moral hypocrisy or deeply hidden instincts unmasked on

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279   Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', pp. 11–12, 28–30.
280   Ibidem, pp. 9–10.
281   Ibidem, pp. 6–7, 14; Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 4, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 483–485.
282   Hennegan, "Personalities and Principles", p. 188.

the stage or in his novels – to a certain degree. It is hard to decide whether Mr Hyde invoked in Dr Jekyll a thrill of horror or a thrill of fascination; most probably, both were at work.[283]

The last decade of the century is seen, not unfittingly, as a period of considerable revival and ferment in English culture, with various philosophical, ideological, and artistic trends contending with one another. Ever-new literary groups, periodicals, and publishing houses appeared, while at the same time, the commercialisation of culture proceeded at a fast pace.[284] Amidst all this cultural activity, it is rather hard to find outstanding works reflecting the energy and optimism of British scholars, inventors, industrialists, capitalists and financiers, explorers and colonial administrators, which, in a word, would affirm or validate their sense of legitimacy and mission. The Victorian middle class did not develop a strong representation of its literary interests – a circumstance regarded by some historians to have been one of the reasons for England's economic slowdown.[285]

On the other hand, the Aesthetes, with Wilde at the head, established a reputation for themselves much stronger than their apparent egotistic elitism could have suggested. This is not to say that voices of principled criticism did not reach them. For example, when Aubrey Beardsley, then a young artist, created his famous illustrations for Wilde's *Salome*, one critic offered dubious praise, attributing to them "the charm of degeneration and decay."[286]

In the summer of 1895, the anonymous author of a long letter to a London daily, under the distinguishing pseudonym *Unknown Quantity*, sparked a lively exchange of opinion with his argument that the wave of agnosticism, the Aesthetic Movement, and the new gospel of sensual incentives were signs of the nation's moral decay. The incomprehensible poems of some smutty French lunatics and criminals dictated the style and the taste of London society, while the newspapers were full of discussions on the decline of the institution of marriage and women's rights. "Extravagance and levity – a restless and morbid spirit – all that

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283 Ibidem, p. 198.

284 Malcolm Bradbury, "London 1890–1920", in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.), *Modernism 1890–1930*, Hassocks, Essex: The Harvester Press, 1978, pp. 183–185.

285 Wiener, *English Culture*, pp. 157–162, and passim.

286 The phrase was used by a *Public Opinion* critic; see e.g. in *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press Inc., 1970, note 9 on p. 59; cf. also: Claudia Doroholschi, *Redesigning Meaning: Aubrey Beardsley and Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, www.uab.ro/reviste_recunoscute/index.php … 2003 [no page numb.]; Niemojowska, *Zapisy zmierzchu*, p. 323.

was implied by that tawdry, borrowed, used-out, detestable word *fin de siècle* – these things have brought us to the point of departure for revolution." The only hope is that these tendencies would inspire a strong current of opinions in favour of moral and physical health.[287]

Articles of this sort triggered numerous rejoinders which were welcomed by the publications' editors and attested to the fact that literary issues are capable of touching the minds and teasing the nerves of newspaper readers. No better proof was needed than the emotions aroused by the English edition, also published in 1895, of Max Nordau's book *Entrartung* (1893), which meant degeneracy, or decadence. The cultural historian George Mosse considered this book one of the major documents of *fin-de-siècle* Europe.[288]

Nordau was a physician who had been born in Budapest, lived in Paris, and wrote in German. He was also a widely respected literary critic, publicist, prolific novelist, and playwright. He wrote several books studying the condition of contemporary European culture, of which *Entrartung*, immediately translated into French, English, Spanish, and Russian, was best known. It was, indeed, a grand volley fired from the trenches of positivism at the decadents who had been advancing from all sides.

Nordau's worldview was rather typical of the European liberal and cosmopolitan intelligentsia that was quite taken with the achievements of the natural sciences and sought in them the engine of civilisational progress, and took a reserved stance with respect to religion, reluctant toward any metaphysical considerations. For this group, the surging wave of criticism of scientific rationalism was a disturbing phenomenon. Nordau extensively cited German and French expressions of disillusionment with empirical methods was amazed that in the face of such epochal discoveries people dared to speak about inefficiency or failure of science.

> If anyone has expected of her that she [science] would explain from one day to another the whole mechanism of the universe, like a juggler explains his apparent magic, he has indeed no idea of the true mission of science. She denies herself all leaps and flights. She advances step by step. She builds slowly and patiently a firm bridge out into the Unknown, and can throw no new arch over the abyss before she has sunk deep the foundations of a new pier in the depths, and raised it to the right height.[289]

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287 John Stokes, *In the Nineties*, New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p. 7.

288 George Mosse, "Max Nordau and his *Degeneration*", in Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. anon., New York: Howard Fertig, 1968, p. XVI.

289 Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, London: William Heinemann, 1895, p. 107.

This is the only way that the future can be won – by means of the reliable effort of the disciplined mind.

And yet the zeitgeist undermined what was axiomatic for Nordau. Some Frenchmen devised the concept that centuries grow old and die like people do, and this was basis for the stupid idea of *fin de siècle* as the end of the epoch, a *twilight of nations*. In fact, though, as Nordau argues, *fin de siècle* is the product of jaded old men jealous of the freshness and joy of youth, thus trying to poison it with their own pessimism. Not to no avail; in fact, millions of people shared a sense of chaos, not knowing what to believe in or what this sudden development of civilisation might bring about. They therefore believed that art, perhaps, might reveal the future for them, give them direction and show them the way – but here they would meet their greatest disappointment, as it is art above all that is diseased.[290]

Art was diseased, and Max Nordau was a doctor who was well-read in both contemporary European literature and in the clinical psychiatric literature representing the expansive nineteenth-century psychiatry of Doctor Morel, Dr Maudsley, Dr Kraft-Ebbing, Professor Charcot – the great authority in French medical science – and many of others who labelled any symptoms of unconventional behaviour with their own learned diagnostic categories. Nordau's work was, significantly, dedicated to Cesare Lombroso, who had been the first in Europe to announce (already in 1863) that there was a relation between genius and insanity, which he illustrated with numerous examples of the eccentricities of creative artists and the masterpieces of maniacs.[291] The critical method applied by Nordau included clinical examination, yet he made his diagnoses on the basis of artistic pieces. In his "clinic" one would find artists searching for new means of expression: those who had parted with academism in painting, with the novel and didactic poetry, with the affirmation of progress in the philosophy of culture. They included Baudelaire and Gautier, Mallarmé and Verlaine, Tolstoy and Wagner, Maeterlinck and Whitman, Husymans and Barrès, the obvious cases of Wilde, Ibsen, Zola, Hauptmann, and of course, Nietzsche. As Dr Nordau demonstrated, their works, though outwardly so diverse, revealed shared symptoms of some form of *degeneration* or *hysteria*, the two main forms of psychic deviation. Thus, if Tolstoy incessantly tried to seek the purpose and meaning of life, it meant that he was compelled by the mania, characteristic of degenerated minds, of futile

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290 Nordau, *Degeneration*, pp. 2–7.

291 Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Walter Scott), 1891; cf. also Lombroso Ferrero (ed.), *Cesare Lombroso. Criminal Man*, pp. 44–45, 61.

deliberation on questions where no reply can ever be satisfactory.[292] By turning normal relationships between males and females upside down in his plays, Ibsen manifested signs of his own masochistic inclinations. A decadent aesthete of Oscar Wilde's sort, who takes pleasure in presenting, if not glorifying, things vicious and transgressional, is only in terms of degree different from a criminal perpetrating such acts in reality.[293] Nietzsche's individualism, the most acute form of *ego-mania*, has led him to condemnation of the conventional ethics as "slavish," so that humanity should be led not by a man of the most powerful mind, disciplined will, and penetrating intelligence, but by a *superman* – an egotistical degenerate, ruthless predator, and a slave of his own unfettered instincts.[294]

Thus, as the author himself admits, his 600-page work was a "long and sorrowful wandering through the hospital"; it was not only one or another trend in the arts but the entire European culture of the century's late years that was found to be pathological. The evolution of civilisation, so creative and promising, was progressing too quickly for the people, whose nervous systems were thus exposed to excessive stimuli. The only ones who could stand up to the implacable technological development, especially the information revolution, were those who got up in the morning and worked without lassitude from dawn to dusk, kept their minds bright, their stomachs sound, and muscles tough. Those who were weak in body and soul, languorous and oversensitive in character, would drop out of the race. Such individuals were the first to show the symptoms of nervous exhaustion or, to use the medical term, melancholy, providing the grounds for the whole range of civilisational diseases.

Degenerate art blossoms in such an atmosphere, it is self obsessed, and any and all types of mysticisms, symbolisms, pessimisms, and diabolisms can infect the minds of those already exhausted and thus prone to such deformations, along with nonentities following the new vogue out of sheer snobbery. "We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria, and it is natural that we should ask anxiously on all sides: 'What is to come next?'"[295]

Civilisation shall continue to progress towards its higher destinies. "Whoever looks upon civilization as a good, having value and deserving to be defended, must mercilessly crush under his thumb the anti-social vermin." In particular,

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292   Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 166.
293   Ibidem, p. 326; cf. Patrick Bade, "Art and degeneration: visual icons of corruption", in Chamberlin and Gilman (eds.), *Degeneration*, p. 236.
294   Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 472.
295   Nordau, *Degeneration*, pp. 31–41, 536–541.

there is no room amongst us for Nietzschean predatory beasts: "All our labour is performed by men who esteem each other, have consideration for each other, mutually aid each other, and know how to curb their selfishness for the general good."[296] Their task is, with the help of psychiatrists, to warn the public against the degenerates who feed off of humanity's great achievements.

Nordau concluded his argument with an impressive manifesto of an old-school liberal:

> We in particular, who have made it our life's task to combat antiquated superstition, to spread enlightenment, to demolish historical ruins and remove their rubbish, to defend the freedom of the individual against State oppression and the mechanical routine of the Philistine; we must resolutely set ourselves in opposition to the miserable mongers who seize upon our dearest watchwords, with which to entrap the innocent. The "freedom" and "modernity", the "progress" and "truth", of these fellows are not ours. We have nothing in common with them. [...] The criterion by which true moderns may be recognised and distinguished from impostors calling themselves moderns may be this: Whoever preaches absence of discipline is an enemy of progress ; and whoever worships his "I" is an enemy to society. Society has for its first premise, neighbourly love and capacity for self-sacrifice; and progress is the effect of an ever more rigorous subjugation of the beast in man, of an ever tenser self-restraint, an ever keener sense of duty and responsibility. The emancipation for which we are striving is of the judgment, not of the appetites.[297]

Can one imagine a more model example of the struggle of two mutually alien mentalities? Nordau was an extreme fanatic of rationalism and his critical tools can be easily ridiculed today; he was incapable of understanding the contemporary art of his day (and worse, his concept of *degenerate art* has bad connotations even today). He lost the battle – he was doomed to lose it. The writers he attacked belong now, a century later, to the canon of European culture and arts, whereas if Nordau's name is ever mentioned, it is in most cases related to a later period in his life. A few years after *Entartung* was published, influenced by the Dreyfus trial and the atmosphere in Paris, he converted to Zionism and became the closest associate of Theodor Herzl – and, in this capacity, Nordau wrote the once-famous orations at the Basel congresses. As a cultural critic, Nordau's fame did not last long in the European memory.

In the short run, however, the English edition of *Entartung* was a sensation (five editions within a few months, to be precise) and triggered an emotional debate. All the leading periodicals published reviews or retorts; moreover, several books were published that refuted, ridiculed, or satirised Nordau's diagnoses.

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296   Ibidem, p. 557.
297   Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 560.

Bernard Shaw's rebuttal, originally printed in an American anarchist periodical under the telling title *A Degenerate's View of Mr. Nordau,* was the most well-known of these.[298] Shaw mocked Nordau's clinical approach, portraying him as an obsessive maniac and philistine who saw degeneracy in everything in life or art that had broken out of the confines of the congealed conventions that cloaked the moral hypocrisy of polite society. Shaw did admit that there is a grain of truth in Nordau's argument, for even though human evolution is driving towards the moral autonomy of individual conscience, if the process should take place too quickly it could threaten a loss of self-discipline and sense of responsibility.[299]

Interestingly, the traditionalists were scarcely heard from in this dispute. The confrontation involved two concepts of modernity. An enthusiast of science, technology, and clinical studies, as well as a religious agnostic, Nordau contrasted his own standards of moral, intellectual, and linguistic correctitude with the entire cohort of artists who were linked with one another through nothing but the right to unrestrained imagination, artistic experiment, and moral provocation – in a word, the right to challenge any conventional propriety, a privilege they had accorded to themselves without anybody's permission. One could say that this was a struggle between modernisation and modernism, with each contesting world considering the other degenerate and absurd.

It was with confidence that Nordau looked toward the coming century which would see an age of completed natural selection with the healthy inheriting the earth:

> The end of the twentieth century, therefore, will probably see a generation to whom it will not be injurious to read a dozen square yards of newspapers daily, to be constantly called to the telephone, to be thinking simultaneously of the five continents of the world, to live half their time in a railway carriage or in a flying machine, and to satisfy the demands of a circle of ten thousand acquaintances, associates, and friends. It will know how to find its ease in the midst of a city inhabited by millions, and will be able, with nerves of gigantic vigour, to respond without haste or agitation to the almost innumerable claims of existence.[300]

Though, I would not say that this particular prophecy speaks against his imaginative powers.

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298 Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 125–127; Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 24–27; Stokes, *In the Nineties*, 11–14; Harpham, "Time Running Out", pp. 290–293, 300.

299 George Bernard Shaw, *The Sanity of Art: An Exposure of the Current Nonsense about Artists Being Degenerate*, London: Constable & Co., 1911, esp. pp. 51–54, 66–72.

300 Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 541.

Meanwhile, however, such evolutionary optimism was not highly respected in the circles of high culture. Writers preferred to look forward with gloom. As George Mosse has put it, the firmness of Nordau's world has disappeared, but the prophet of *Degeneration* was right in his conviction that the way from the world of chaos leads to pessimism. The very concept of human nature, expectedly or not, was to evolve toward addressing increased importance to the irrational components of worldview and unconscious behavioural drives and incentives, concepts that nourish literature and the arts to this day. Art draws its dignity from opposing the world, while the world, ignoring its poets and philosophers, changes year to year owing to works of physicists and engineers.[301]

The inability of the two domains to reach an understanding was dramatically brought under the spotlight with Oscar Wilde's trial, which began in 1895 – the year the English edition of Nordau's work was published. For Nordau, and he was not alone, Wilde was the prime example of a degenerate writer, all the more menacing as he was seductive. As was said, his plays and novels enjoyed enormous popularity, and his ostentation and views were directed all the more intensely at the deepest beliefs of the decent public – their ideals of masculinity and femininity, the traditional understanding of the social roles of the sexes which had already been put in question by the popular and successful plays of Ibsen and the intensifying women's emancipation movement.[302] It is noteworthy that when France was shaken by the Dreyfus affair, England was excitedly following Wilde's case. The undermining of traditional moral taboos that had been shielded by hypocrisy and literary self-censorship was an act of transgression no less serious than the attempt made in France to undermine the image of a genuine patriot using the perennial stereotype of the Jew as a spy.

We will not recount here the long and sensational trial which was a dramatic clash between decent England and *decadent* England.[303] The former prevailed, if only for the time being, whilst the latter was utterly humiliated. However, when reading Oscar Wilde's poignant letters from prison, it is easy to spot how the suffering of a most deeply hurt man blends with the pride of a rebel anticipating his victory from beyond the grave: "I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things. […] I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me. […] It [Humility] is the

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301 Mosse, "Max Nordau", pp. XXX–XXXIV.
302 Hennegan, "Personalities and Principles", pp. 189–194.
303 Niemojowska, *Zapisy zmierzchu*, pp. 386–393.

last thing left in me, and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived […].”[304] Then follows an ardent confession of faith in Christ, the nonconformist who “had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike; for him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely […] That which is the very keynote of romantic art was to him the proper basis of natural life.”

I can see no reason why his confession in *De Profundis* should be seen as yet one more of Wilde’s many costumes, as some critics would advise. On the contrary, I would be inclined to see in this letter from the Reading gaol a sincere and painfully blunt personal confession. In any case, this would not make a difference for the purpose of the present argument. Of relevance is the image of Christ and the Pharisees:

> His chief war was against the Philistines. That is the war every child of light has to wage. Philistinism was the note of the age and community in which he lived. In their heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy, their worship of vulgar success, their entire preoccupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance, the Jews of Jerusalem in Christ’s day were the exact counterpart of the British Philistine of our own. Christ mocked at the “whited sepulchre” of respectability, and fixed that phrase for ever. […] He pointed out that forms and ceremonies were made for man, not man for forms and ceremonies.[305]

The paradox of this situation is that it was exactly at that very time, when the positions of bourgeois progress and the new Romanticists had been so clearly set by both parties, that the lines of combat were receding in the face of forms of culture which remained unappreciated by either party. For both *L’Affaire* in Paris and the trial and sentencing of Wilde in London made it apparent how dangerous a power the tabloids, such as *Le Petit Journal*, the *Daily Mail*, and their peers, had become.[306] Selling even a million copies, they proved they could create “heroes” one day and hurl them into oblivion the next, dictate the canons of morality, and brutally hunt for any sensation. The role of the press in creating a climate of fear was dual. First, it lay bare the most shameful mysteries of large cities, their

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304 Oscar Wilde, “De Profundis”, in Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds.), *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, London: Forth Estate, 2000, p. 729. [A late edition is quoted since the originally published text was severely reduced.]

305 Wilde, “De Profundis”, pp. Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, New York and London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1905, pp. 83–88.

306 Patrick Brantlinger, “Mass Media and Culture in *Fin de Siècle* Europe”, in Teich and Porter (eds.), *Fin de Siècle and Its Legacy*, pp. 104–105.

guts and underbelly, doing so with enjoyment. Second, the press epitomised, in itself, the remorseless vulgarity of the times. The liberals, who for a long time had been advocating for common schooling and the elimination of illiteracy, were stupefied to see what the masses, once taught how to read, were actually reading. "How does it concern our culture," the historian G.M. Trevelyan wrote in 1901, "that Shakespeare, Milton, Ruskin, in times gone by wrote in our language, if for all the countless weary ages to come the hordes that we breed and send out to swamp the world shall browse with ever-increasing appetite on the thin swollen stuff that commerce has now learnt to supply for England's spiritual and mental food?"[307]

One of the contributors to the discussion on Nordau's book remarked that if we are to speak about nervous, mental, or venereal diseases apparently resulting from a life of exposure to excessive stimuli, those afflictions were much more widely spread amongst workers, soldiers, and sailors than amongst oversensitive artists;[308] and the tabloids, the vanguard of mass culture, certainly teased the nerves of the urban crowd. Thus, the topic of *degeneration* was returning to its primary form, making the debate on the literary decadents look like entertainment for small coteries that had been inflated for a while by hungry journalists. The social contrasts of the large metropolises, their charm and misery, temptations and crimes, were exploited by the modernist and naturalist novel, and its abused and pretentious metaphor was depicting the city as the depths of hell. Thus, London became a spectral netherworld or infernal abyss, not to mention the comparisons to the mythical Babylon or Sodom.[309]

This is how, as the century came to an end, all the fears and obsessions coincided, both realistic and unrealistic, tormenting Victorian England: apprehensions about the vulgarisation of culture and the degeneration of the race, moral decline and the collapse of society; the fear of revolution or, at least, the premature political emancipation of society's underclasses; distress that industry was polluting the air, poisoning the waters, and destroying the landscape; fear of a flood of unassimilable immigrants from the British colonies or Jews from the east of Europe; aversion to art that was incomprehensible, impudent, and therefore, decadent; fear of the loss of the *virility*, that would ensure peace for Britain and its place as a ruler of the world.[310] All these motifs, of such various origins and content, were intertwined and fed upon one another, creating an impressive

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307 Quoted after: ibidem, p. 105.
308 Stokes, *In the Nineties*, p. 13.
309 Bradbury, "London 1890–1920", pp. 180–182.
310 Hennegan, "Personalities and Principles", pp. 190–191.

vocabulary of the public debate, full of synonymous words and amplifications. Most of these started with the letter D:

> *Debacle, Debasement, Debauchery, Decadence, Decay, Decline, Decomposition, Decrepitude, Defilement, Degeneration, Degeneracy, Degradation, Desolation, Despondency, (Self-)Destruction, Deterioration, Disarray, Disease, Disintegration, Disorder, Dissolution, Death.*

Those with other initial letters included: *Corruption, Crisis, Fall, Involution, Regression, Retrogression, Twilight, End*.

The language was infectious – as were the emotions and suspicions it expressed. The language served to alert the public, drawing its attention to biological, economic, and moral threats, but even more frequently, it indicated some vaguely defined state of tension and anxiety related to the invasion of modernity. There were, in fact, two mutually contradicting types of anxiety. One of these, provoked by accounts in the press of the atrocities of war, or of the horrid deeds described in the crime chronicles, was the distress caused by the idea that the layer of polish and urbanity separating European civilisation from the coarse and brutal nature of man was so thin and uncertain, that man's bestial nature comes into play the moment public discipline and fear of law are relaxed. The other anxiety was perhaps even more pessimistic. The root of evil and decay was not in nature but in contemporary civilisation itself, which effectively undoes the beneficial effects of nature. Looking at it this way, progress and regression are not pointing in opposite directions, for *progress is regression*.[311]

Putting it otherwise, progress means the expiration of human history. An almost forgotten but still fascinating document of British futurology of the period is worth looking at as we end this discussion. In 1893, Charles R. Pearson, a little-known historian and former minister of one of the Australian states,[312] published a book with the puzzling title *National Life and Character: A Forecast*[313] which attracted the attention of the public. The author identified several trends at the time which, to his mind, would intensify and ultimately change the face of England and the world. The first was the inevitable emancipation of the colonies and the coloured races, which would swiftly put an end to the demographic expansion of the White race. The second was a rapid growth of the role of the state, particularly the nation state, whose functionaries would control a number of domains

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311   Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, pp. 106, 223, 230.
312   Briggs, *The Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, p. 294.
313   Charles Pearson, *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893.

of life – above all, education. The third trend was of social reforms, regulation of the labour market, and the improved situation of the indigent classes, which the author refers to as "state socialism." As is apparent, these forecasts were sober and nowise catastrophic. Pearson expected that with the end of the imperialist epoch, there would be no more wars (though the armies would have to remain at the ready to face the constant threat from China and Islam). Increased wealth would bring about social stabilisation, at least in Europe, while the waning bonds with family, commune, and the Church would be replaced by patriotic education and the authority of the welfare state.

Pearson feared that the price for peace, for solving the most drastic social problems, and for extending the human lifespan would be a weakening of *character* and the demise of great individuals and high aspirations: "It is possible to conceive the administration of the most advanced states so equitable and efficient that no one will even desire seriously to disturb it." Consequently, two powerful incentives – the desire to use power to achieve great ends and the desire for fame and glory – will yield to the trivial pursuit of money, "and generally […] the world will be left without deep convictions or enthusiasm, without the regenerating influence of the ardour for political reform, and the fervour of pious faith which have quickened men for centuries past as nothing else has quickened them, with a passion purifying the soul."[314]

In Pearson there is no railing against technology and modernity, nor is there the least hint of nostalgia for a lost idyllic past. What he offers is the presumption that the prosperous society will gradually grow old, in demographical as well as historical terms, losing its original energy, will, and purpose that exceed the needs of the day. That society will plausibly be reluctant to resort to violence and free of crime. Science will do its work for the benefit of mankind, but will no longer have any great truth to reveal to the world. Literature will descend to the level of journalism, attentive to its reach, speed, and entertainment value for readers, rather than to any deep ideas or imaginativeness. *Bric-à-brac* will pass for art, without the ambition of insight into otherworldly things.

The world Charles Pearson describes in his book in a calm and matter-of-fact manner, without satirical or moralistic undertones, is a history of the end of history – the end of ideology, religion, and philosophy, a sad vision of a contented egalitarian society that desires nothing more and for whom personality is an awkward burden. "Yet there seems no reason why men of this kind should not

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314   Ibidem, pp. 336–337.

perpetuate the race, increasing and multiplying, till every rood of earth maintains its man, and the savour of vacant lives will go up to God from every home."[315]

This is a suggestive commentary, coming to us from *turn-of-the-century* London. We should obviously be cautious in submitting to this suggestion. It happens to historians that the subject of their investigation assumes enormous proportions, like when under a microscope, the miniscule completely fills the field of view. Those researchers who claim that the discourse on degeneration dominated British intellectual life of the late nineteenth century and triggered a great "degeneration scare"[316] undoubtedly exaggerate. Yet, it also was not merely an innocent fixation. The persistent idea of a fall from the summit, or of the weariness of old and stale nations, left its mark on many opinions about the world and had grave political consequences.

Brave New Century

A thick line of police separated the vast crowd from the retinue all along the route, from Buckingham Palace to St. Paul's Cathedral. The pageant was, indeed, extraordinary. The mounted rifles from New Zealand were splendid, accompanied by a contingent of Maori warriors who had recently defended their land against oversea invaders. The Queen's carriage was preceded by bearded Sikhs wearing turbans and Pathans in their colourful uniforms. The four hundred million of the Queen's subjects, from Honduras to the Cook Islands, were on that day – the 22nd of June, 1897 – celebrating the Queen's Diamond Jubilee marking the sixtieth anniversary of her happy reign. No monarch had ever ruled an empire this enormous. Never had any nation been so strongly convinced that it brought the blessings of progress and civilisation to the world.[317]

Torn by the struggles for the honour of Captain Dreyfus and for the rule of law, France was simultaneously preparing its great illumination. The Paris Exposition of 1900 eclipsed all such preceding occurrences. Electricity was its leitmotif: the Electricity Palace at Champ-de-Mars, a moving pavement, a fiesta of light, and powerful German dynamos heralded a new era that would replace the smoky era of coal and steam. Saint-Saëns composed a hymn in praise of "the heavenly fire." The writer and draughtsman Albert Robida, who had in 1888 offered the idea

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315   Ibidem, 338.

316   Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 130, 257.

317   James Laurence, "Jubilation and humiliation", *The Daily Telegraph*, 21st May 1997, 18; Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: a Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890–1914*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966, p. 54.

that all centuries end badly and warned that the nineteenth century, unable to digest the smelted steel and chemical products of an era of scientific barbarism, was doomed to perish, and who later keenly predicted what excellent inventions the *electrical life* would bring to the twentieth century and what miseries they would cause, was appointed the chief decorator for the Exposition – a project that was meant to negate such scepticism. The decadent *fin-de-siècle* mood had evaporated, and even though rapid-fire artillery and machine guns were displayed, the exhibition was uplifting and instilled belief in a great future for all humanity. On opening the *Exposition Internationale Universelle*, the President of the Republic – accompanied by Alexandre Millerand, the first socialist minister in a European government – referred to the coming of an epoch of justice and mutual goodwill.[318]

Again, progress was everyone's byword. Or, more prudently, nearly everyone's. Hundreds of articles and feuilletons bidding farewell to the nineteenth century remarked that it had brought about change more considerable than the preceding eighteen centuries combined. Two years before the century was seen off, the venerable Alfred Wallace juxtaposed its achievements and losses, finding the balance definitely positive: "not only is our century superior to any that have gone before it, but […] it may be compared with the whole preceding historical period. It must therefore be held to constitute the beginning of a new era of human progress," he wrote in a book titled *The Wonderful Century* (1898).[319] Thus, the first civilisation that was the work of man's thirst for discovery was paying homage to itself – proud of its Promethean spirit, seeking neither limits nor rest.

Émile Faguet, a member of the Académie française, was of the opinion that this age of so many rapid changes would be followed by a relatively tranquil century, which would have to digest the discoveries made by the preceding one. But even he was doubtful about his own predictions. Nobody suspected that the Newtonian model of the universe would be soon overturned, but expectations did not include a siesta. The turn of the century predisposed people to wonder about the future; there was probably no periodical that didn't embrace the prophetic frenzy, and giving free rein to the imagination yielded predictions that weren't always rosy. The successes in technology, in particular, had become cause for concern. Would the discoveries not slip out of control? Would they not

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318   Schwartz, *Century's End*, p. 165; Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, pp. 67–71, 77, 237; Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras*, pp. 300–307.

319   Cited after: Asa Briggs and Daniel Snowman (eds.), *Fins de Siècle: How Centuries End 1400–2000*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 162; see also: Briggs, *The Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, p. 297.

contribute to war and destruction? Those years, indeed, saw many stories and prognostications of future wars; in the latter group, a six-volume work (published 1898 in Russian and, shortly afterwards, in Polish and German, and in an abridged version, in French and English) by Warsaw banker and industrialist Jan Bloch, was well received. In it he argued, calling on substantial technical and statistical data, that a future war would be so horrible and economically destructive that no-one would find it politically viable or worthwhile. A similar view was expressed by Alfred Nobel, the Swedish inventor and producer of explosives who died in 1896, who had hoped that the deterrent effect of dynamite was powerful enough to put an end to war.[320]

The first zeppelins and aeroplanes extraordinarily captured the imagination of authors of various futuristic genres; war in the air, annihilation from the air, and even a revolution supported by air bombing, were at the new century's onset the spine-chillers favoured by readers and cherished by writers. Nobody, of course, could outdo Herbert G. Wells, as far as this genre is concerned (this author will be covered at greater length later in this chapter). When it came to who would fight against whom, a number of combinations were happily considered, including a clash between the White and the Yellow civilisations or, more broadly, between an undefined West and an indeterminate East.[321]

This was also a fertile time (in America more so than in Europe) for evangelists of all sorts, who calculated, based on the prophetic books of the Old and New Testament, and not for the first time, the exact date of Doomsday, the Second Coming, and the apocalyptic horrors to precede them.[322] The influence of all these prophecies, predictions, sober warnings, and fictionalised horrors on the real expectations of Europeans around the year 1900 is difficult to estimate. It is certain that anxiety regarding the military arsenals of the powers disturbed the aura of pride in the century's scientific and technological achievements, or at least inspired actions meant to prevent a catastrophic course of events. The international pacifist movement became organised in the last years of century, and the endeavours of Russian diplomacy brought about the first Hague Conference in 1899, whose results were disproportionate to expectations.[323]

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320   Jean de Bloch, *The Future of War in its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations*, Boston: Ginn & Company, 1899; Ryszard Kołodziejczyk, *Jan Bloch (1836–1902): szkic do portretu "króla polskich kolei",* Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1983, pp. 211–231; Schwartz, *Century's End*, p. 180.

321   Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, p. 243.

322   Schwartz, *Century's End*, pp. 172–173, 177, 187, 245.

323   Tuchman, *The proud tower*, pp. 229–267.

One could find consolation in the fact that bloody wars were being waged in remote exotic countries such as Cuba, the Philippines, Manchuria, or Sudan – far from a Europe which had been enjoying peace and prosperity for years. This comfort was destroyed by the Boer War, which received a great deal of attention and publicity across Europe, triggering anti-British sentiment nearly everywhere – while raising the morale of imperial patriots in England. The isolation complex was given expression, in 1900, by the popular *Daily Mail*, where after recounting the intoxicating triumphs of man in his struggle to subdue the forces of nature, the tabloid reflected on the situation of the Britons, the leaders of this progressive trend: "We are aware that we are bitterly envied and hated by the world, and that at this very critical moment in some inscrutable manner the old fire of energy seems to be waning within us. We are entering stormy seas, and the time may be near when we shall have to fight in very truth for our life, 'neath noble stars beside a brink unknown."[324]

For the time being, the front ran through Transvaal, where thousands of British soldiers were perishing from diseases or were killed by the local settlers doggedly defending themselves. This ill-fated and unexpectedly drawn out war, unpopular among a considerable portion of even the British the population, jolted the country, and its effects were felt long after the hostilities had ended. Before the end of this war, a great epoch in British history came to an end. Queen Victoria did not live to see the nineteenth century; she died in January 1901, having ruled for sixty-three years. The glorious jubilee was by then a faded memory.[325]

When contrasted with the dramatic years immediately preceding the Great War, the Edwardian decade is described by historians as the relatively serene decline of Victorian England. All the same, British political literature reflected a surging anxiety from the very first years of the new century that was primarily focused on the state of the Empire, which at the peak of its impressive expansion was both a source of pride and concern. The reason for the concern was basically the same as the reason for the pride: namely, rampant imperial expansion and its moral grounds.

The latter were numerous. A strong belief in the linear progress of civilisation, placing Europe at the head of mankind and Britain at the head of Europe, perforce instilled in the British a sense of mission with respect to the backward peoples of Asia, let alone the savages of Africa or the Pacific. In such an approach,

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324 Briggs, *The Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, p. 293.
325 Asa Briggs, "The 1890s: Past, Present and Future in Headlines", in Briggs and Snowman (eds.), *Fins de Siècle*, pp. 166–168.

colonialism was nothing other than a tool for cultural and Christian missionary work, the bearing of the White Man's burden – so glorified by Kipling – a benefaction for the coloured races, for whom it hastened to ease their way up from naïve childhood to the higher rungs of maturity. This confidence was crowned by a contemporised Enlightenment-inspired utopia – namely, the belief that the British Empire was a preparatory stage for a future world federation of free peoples.[326]

Meanwhile, however, the ideology of expansion more often went hand in hand with the mobilisation of patriotic pride than with daydreams of international peace. The problem with this was that patriotism was by nature English, Scottish, or Irish, whereas the empire was British. Thus, the imperial myth served the formation of a broader – that is, British – nationalism, or one could say it raised self-awareness of the Anglo-Saxon race. "I believe in this race," Joseph Chamberlain, a new-generation politician, declared, "the greatest governing race the world has ever seen; in this Anglo-Saxon race, so proud, tenacious, self-confident and determined, this race which neither climate nor change can degenerate, which will infallibly be the predominant force of future history and universal civilization."[327]

Apart from such racial pride, the imperial conquests were also backed by a vulgarised version of organicist sociology which promoted the conviction across Europe that a sound nation had to win a living space for its future generations – or give up its place to others. The clash of imperial ambitions was part of the logic behind this philosophy, while expansion was tangible evidence of the nation's vigour.[328]

In the late nineteenth century, the virile rhetoric of Mission and Service, Race and Civilisation was a strong feature of the elitist public school education, as well as of popular literature and the yellow press, marching songs, music-halls, and the Salvation Army. The working classes were also to take pride in the feats of Cecil Rhodes and other conquerors of faraway lands, thanks to whom the Empire's glory would shine down on their own mundane lot.[329]

When Empire building came across local resistance from the unappreciative new subjects of the Queen or met with rivalry from another European power, militant sentiments awakened. The popular term jingoism (originating from the

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326 Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 265–267.

327 Quoted after: Alfred Cobban, "The Idea of Empire", in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, pp. 329–330.

328 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918. With a new preface*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 233–236.

329 Hennegan, "Personalities and Principles", p. 190.

phrase "by jingo!") had reportedly developed much earlier on from an impudent London music-hall song. Flushed with Britain's success, the jingoes' enthusiasm enjoyed a lively, if brief, popularity on the streets and in alehouses and admissions offices. Young men were tempted by opportunities for desert and wilderness adventure and the possibility of advancement in the colonial troops – at least until the myth of the invincible army and charitable administration suffered a bitter blow from the heavy hands of Dutch settlers in Africa.[330]

The shock of the Boer War strengthened the position of the opponents of imperial politics. Among them, John Hobson, a talented publicist and economist of the moderate and reformatory Left, gained considerable renown and influence. The author of a penetrating and widely translated study on the development of capitalism,[331] Hobson published *The Psychology of Jingoism* in 1901, which was followed the next year by a piece of scathing criticism of imperialism that introduced the concept to a wider audience. According to Hobson, modern urban society can easily transform into a giant mob, where all, including the educated classes, could be "superseded by the sudden fervour of this strange amalgam of race feeling, animal pugnacity, rapacity, and sporting zest, which they dignify by the name of patriotism." The unleashed passions and cruelty are a "convincing testimony to the descent of man."[332] All the ideological justifications of colonial expansion are nothing but a smokescreen shielding the economic interests of great capital which, having subdued the government, pushes the State forward to conquer new markets to compensate for unsatisfactory demand and decreasing profits in the internal market. This is a parasitic capital, one which drains the wealth of the overseas countries in order to provide the metropolis's workers with their bread and circuses and ensure safe profits and deluxe consumption for itself.[333] Working in its own interest and to its own benefit, this capital has excited and is fuelling the jingoes' fervour through the fanaticised nationalist press and declamations of the Empire's glory.

Hobson turned the tables on the social Darwinists' conclusions, popular at the century's end, whereby highly-civilised, resilient, and acquisitive nations would attain an inexorable advantage and, ultimately, dominion over underdeveloped

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330 Cobban, "The Idea of Empire", p. 332; Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 7, 17–18.

331 John A. Hobson, *The evolution of modern capitalism: a Study of Machine Production*, London: Walter Scott, 1894.

332 John A. Hobson, *The Psychology of Jingoism*, London: Grant Richards, 1901, pp. 21, 31; quoted after: Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, pp. 112–114.

333 Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 266–267.

countries that had proved unable to adapt to competition: colonialism was merely a manifestation that this historical necessity was indeed at work. So Hobson, making use of his concept of economic parasitism and evoking Imperial Rome as an example, deduced the opposite: "The laws which, operative throughout nature, doom the parasite to atrophy, decay, and final extinction, are not evaded by nations any more than by individual organisms." It follows from this that in the global struggle, it is not imperialism that will inherit the future, but rather the very barbarians that imperialism is trying to subordinate. In a word, imperialism marks the onset of the fall of Western civilisation.[334]

Together with this argument, the contention over the British Empire took on a new dimension. Besides the question of the moral right to rule over other peoples and to impose British products, ideas, and institutions on them, the question arose about the efficacy of such a scheme. The very axiom of "higher civilisation" was subject (though still sporadically) to doubt, not in favour of some belated Rouseauism, as the noble and happy savage had more or less gone out of fashion, but in favour of the White Man's self irony, who happened to experience how thin the Christian and liberal veneer turned out to be when confronted with untamed nature and tribes. If Joseph Conrad's testimony is to be trusted, in the tropical (though preferably not British!) *outposts of progress*, the civilisers themselves were at risk of insanity – giving in to their primal instincts and descending into the *heart of darkness*, dread, and emptiness – whereas nice words praising the blessings of progress and law were not so much even ideological camouflage but private self-deception.

The question of efficacy was not limited, however, to the most dramatic individual experiences, but concerned whether England was at all capable of meeting the challenge of maintaining an Empire. An anonymous 1905 pamphlet entitled *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (clearly) responded to this question with a definite "no!" Using an old trick from the Enlightenment, the author posed as a Japanese writing a hundred years later, in the year 2005, in order to explain to the students in his country the reasons for the fall of "our late ally." The anonymous author was a certain Elliott Mills, a student at Oxford University. The young man found symptoms of decline in the entire lifestyle and fancies of his contemporaries in England at the time, whose health, reason, and faith had been poisoned by the disastrous influence of the urban environment. Having given up life in the countryside or by the sea, in line with nature and national tradition,

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334   John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, London: James Nisbet & Co., Ltd, 1902, p. 389; quoted after: Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses*, p. 144.

the English had given themselves up to the pleasures of living a luxurious life, lost their good taste in literature, declined physically and mentally, and started replacing their religious faith with positivism, determinism, and chiromancy. It was clear to this author that such a life, combined with high taxes, had rendered them not only unable to defend the Empire but even their own country if need be, because – as the Oxonian Tokyoite argued, "God's unalterable law concerning the survival of the fittest is just as applicable to the life of a Nation as it is to the briefer existence of an animal or a human being."[335]

This is how the rather stereotypical and nostalgic Tory-style moralising adopted the then fashionable social-Darwinist creed, presented this time – to make things more diverting – as the law of God, all in order to frighten fellow-countrymen with visions of the impending downfall. And since everyone likes being frightened a little, the pamphlet about the Empire's fall was sympathetically appraised by the reviewers in *The Times* and a few other conservative papers, selling well and exerting some influence on certain educational undertakings that will be covered at some length in a moment.

It is noteworthy that both the reactionary Mills and the radical Hobson compared the future fate of the British Empire with that of the *Imperium Romanum*. There was no way to escape the analogy; it flowed off the nib of many writers' pens and its moral was always the same: *memento mori*. After all:

> Cities and Thrones and Powers
> Stand in Time's eye,
> Almost as long as flowers,
> Which daily die.[336]

Civilisations were mortal, for with their ever expanding frontiers and overgrown wealth and pride, they were losing the spirit of commitment and sacrifice for the common weal. Thus, the British Empire was to share the fate of Nineveh, Rome, or Venice – as Ruskin, who was otherwise enthusiastic about the British civilisation mission, had once predicted,[337] and after him, a whole tribe of the lesser-fry

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335 [Anonymous], *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire : a brief account of those causes which resulted in the destruction of our late ally, together with a comparison between the British and Roman Empires* ; appointed for use in the national schools of Japan, "Tokio [sic] 2005", Oxford: Alden & Co., Ltd., Bocardo Press, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. Ltd., [no publ. date]), pp. 22; quoted after: Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 24–25.

336 Rudyard Kipling, *Recessional*; quoted after: Cobban, 'The Idea of Empire', p. 332.

337 Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, pp. 71, 80–81; Sherburne, *John Ruskin*, pp. 196, 202–206.

prophets on the Left and Right alike. As we have already mentioned, the ruins of Rome served as a warning to the whole of Europe, persistently reappearing in its national literatures, nevertheless the very word "Empire" made the comparison all the more compelling. It would seem that British democracy at the threshold of the twentieth century was scarcely similar to Diocletian's Rome, but such an afterthought rarely tempered the aficionados of comparative studies, particularly with their three constant motifs: the emasculation and moral degradation of the higher classes, the demands of the populace and their eternal hunger for bread and circuses, and pressure of barbarians from the outside.[338]

As for the barbarians, they were seen for the English in the "Yellow Peril" and, with the passage of time, more and more frequently in German uniforms. The astonishingly rapid industrial development of the Reich and its armaments, the expansion of its merchant fleet and warships, and lastly, Wilhelmian Germany's participation in the partition of Africa – all of this aroused an increasing sense of threat in the British Isles which was reflected in the rising number of invasion novels. This genre of futuristic speculative fiction, born in the Victorian period, was a sort of popular adventure literature, but with a didactic purpose – particularly when the defeat of the invading forces, disciplined and having powerful technological machineries at their disposal, seemed to call for increasing mobilisation of the reserves. Britain, for a change, had lost its fighting spirit. An amateur play that enjoyed much success in 1909 London, written by a Royal Fusiliers officer from South Africa, featured a troop of brutal soldiers of the Empress of the North from Nearland who break into the English home of Mr and Mrs Brown, passionate fans of football, who themselves have floppy bellies, sunken chests and carious teeth, and no idea how to use arms. It was only the occupiers' terror that would awaken the England's dormant patriotism and the will to offer armed resistance.[339]

Some of the invasion novels portrayed the invaders getting into the Islands via a tunnel covertly drilled beneath the English Channel. The motif was not a new one; engineering designs for the construction of such a tunnel had appeared in the British Parliament and the press several times, beginning with the eighties, each time arousing traditional distrust of the French and a shiver of fear that British isolation might be breached. As we know, the underground normally evokes mysterious associations with strong symbolic and mythological potential in the collective imagination, and modernist literature was all too

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338   Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses*, passim.

339   Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 46–48; Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, p. 380; Harpham, "Time Running Out", p. 300.

willing to exploit this. Thus, the undersea tunnel projects, intensifying the fears of an imperceptible invasion of attackers or racially alien immigrants, could have seemed to be diversion that would lead to England's falling prey to ravishers and, once degenerated, the deprivation of her of racial or cultural identity.[340]

The last and most pessimistic of the long series of invasion novels, published, literally, on the eve of the Great War, was *When William Came* by the conservative author Saki (H. Munro). It described German occupiers in London ruling over a demoralised society which had long before lost its former attachment to traditional national values; young people were the only ones who could be hoped to bring revival and liberation.[341]

Of course, there was no lack of witty parodies of those moralistic thrillers. One featured the brave Boy Scout Clarence who, all alone, tackled the invading Germans, Russians, Chinese, Moroccan pirates, fanatic mullahs, the Swiss fleet, and the army of the Principality of Monaco.[342] In spite of their jocular tone, these literary invasion fantasies reflected the persistent conviction that England was unprepared for a test of strength – be it moral or physical – and this fear would be voiced again and again, as well as in other genres of national literature.

One such example can be found in the alarming military reports warning that the physical condition of British recruits, their height and health, was steadily deteriorating – a trend that apparently characterised the weakened vitality of the race and foreboded a gloomy future for the Empire. While such alarms were nothing new, their intensification after the Boer War was unprecedented. In its report dated 1904, the Government committee appointed to investigate the issue treated it quite seriously, identifying the poor living conditions and family pathologies in overcrowded metropolitan slums as the main causes of this deterioration. The body recommended, among other things, that the neglected children be brought up in public institutions, with the costs for this to be collected from their fathers who would, in turn, be interned in forced labour colonies.[343] While

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340   Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalization of Slaughter in the Modern Age*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 121–132; Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground: an Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination*, Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990.

341   Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 50–52; Pick, *War Machine*, pp. 110–111, 115–121.

342   Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 48–49.

343   Jones, *Outcast London*, 330–331; Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, 20; Richard Soloway, "Counting the Degenerates; the Statistics of Race Degeneration in Edwardian England", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, no. 1, January 1982: pp. 148–150.

such recommendations were not realistic, that they appeared at all in an official document demonstrates that the ruling Tories and their appointed experts were susceptible to the temptations of authoritarian policies, which can be seen as a measure of their helplessness in the face of intensifying social problems.

In spite of periodical crises, the English economy saw steady development and modernisation, and with it, a noticeable rise in the standard of living – at least for those of the working class who were trained workers, permanently employed, and organised into labour unions. Their electoral potential, and the growing aspirations of their leaders to play an autonomous political role, were not to be neglected.

Nonetheless, the progressing democratisation of British politics, education, and morals created, or at least revealed, no less problems than it solved. Not only the conservatives, who would have not expected much good to come of it anyway, but also the adherents of reforms would come to believe this. With their unprecedented electoral victory of 1906, the liberals were full of energy and spirit for reform, but after being in power for just a few years, England found itself facing an accumulation of conflicts. The intensification of radical Irish nationalism, and with it, the opposition of the Ulster Unionists to the ever-postponed Home Rule projects; the increasingly boisterous demonstrations of determined suffragettes; the great strikes of the sailors, dockworkers, railwaymen, and Welsh miners; the constitutional conflict between the Houses of Parliament; the increased power and significance of the Labour Party, mainly at the expense of the liberals – all attested to the fact that satisfying demands brings new and more far-reaching aspirations.

Understandably, those who were attached to the old style of dignified and condescending politics, its being a gentlemen's job, regardless of their party affiliation or sympathies, watched these developments with anxiety, even though they may have contributed to them. Garish vulgarity was the most outstanding, blatantly obvious characteristic of the new, mass society. The inexhaustible source of this vulgarity was the yellow press, which in the second half of the nineteenth century had become powerful in many European countries. The *Daily Mail* had in 1896 a circulation of approximately 400,000, and during the years of the Boer War, it sold a million copies daily. Much like the American yellow journalism, or the Parisian large-scale newspapers during the Dreyfus affair, the London dailies provided fodder for the masses for militant nationalism and racism, along with

gossip about lives of the royalty and upper echelons.[344] Perforce, election campaigns, their style and slogans, had to adopt to the new standards.

The old liberal daydream of the potential of education and improved living conditions to gradually prepare the masses for participation in culture and civil rights was now coming true in an ironical form: a culture degraded by commercialisation, a politics degraded by demagogy. Even sport, the pride of English schools and universities, was becoming commercialised. The great masculine adventure and chivalric game was turning into a spectacle for otherwise sickly fans.[345]

The prophets of fall and decay had their own, perverse satisfaction: they had known for years that this was coming. The Marquess of Salisbury, the greatest Tory authority at the century's end, foresaw that democracy would devastate the Empire from within, leaving open only the question of how long it would drag on until its final collapse.[346] But these admonitions were to no avail. Increasingly obstinate and arrogant barbarians were breeding and multiplying in the very heart of the Empire, and although they made use of the achievements of progress, they were alien to the fundamental values of civilisation.[347]

This sombre view of the condition of England and its future at a time when the country was at the height of its power was not held only by the conservatives. Perhaps it depended more on the temper and private philosophy of a given author, than on his political affiliation. Charles Masterman was a Liberal Party politician who, following the 1906 election, joined the government. His essays and sociological analyses from the century's first decade present a disintegrated and weary society that had lost the faith that had once held it together and its sense of duty for the common good.[348] The London slums had given birth to a new, physically and morally degenerated race of human beings. And England, despite attempts to reconstruct its social and political system, remained a state without purpose or compass: "The science which was to allay all diseases, the commerce which was to abolish war, and weave all nations into one human family, the research which was to establish ethics and religion on a secure and positive

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344 Brantlinger, "Mass Media and Culture", pp. 104–105; Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras*, pp. 259–270.

345 Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, pp. 120–121.

346 Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, pp. 214–215.

347 Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses*, p. 31, and passim.

348 Charles F.G. Masterman, *From the Abyss; of its Inhabitants by One of Them*, London, Johnson, 1902; quoted after Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*.

foundation, the invention which was to enable all humanity, with a few hours of not disagreeable work every day, to live for the remainder of their time in ease and sunshine ; all these have become recognized as remote and fairy visions."[349] Masterman saw religious revival and a return to the evangelical faith as the only hope for restoring the meaning of history.

The feeling that interpersonal bonds were disappearing and that life was becoming spiritually barren was certainly nothing new; we might recall previous manifestations of this opinion. We should point out here the perseverance of these diagnoses – or, if you will, sentiments – and the ever-recurring idea of decadence, given the fast pace of change in the civilisational landscape. The idea was poignant indeed – to the extent that the need for the topic to be considered was acknowledged by Arthur J. Balfour himself, the politician and philosopher, a recent (after Salisbury) Prime Minister of a conservative Government, and now – that is, in 1908 – the Opposition leader and a great personality of the British intellectual elite.[350] His lecture at Cambridge's Newnham College, entitled, simply, *Decadence*, had a polemical edge to it, albeit without a clearly defined target. It was a piece of exquisitely intricate style, without a trace of political rhetoric. It did not deal with Decadence in literature or the arts, as the speaker warned in his introduction. It focused, rather, on the decadence that was allegedly characteristic of ageing nations and exhausted civilisations, preceding their fall and demise. But what is the actual rationale behind the comparisons of historical processes with the human lifespan? "But why *should* [italics original] civilizations thus wear out and great communities decay? And what evidence is there that in fact they do?"[351]

This hard-headed and empirical approach to the problem makes Balfour's stance immediately stand out from the jeremiads of the many conservative malcontents. He approached the attempts to transfer the laws of organic evolution onto the ground of social history with wariness. Where is it said, he asked, that old civilisations stop developing and so must give way to their younger, more resilient, and allegedly better adapted rivals? A decrease of the relative position

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349   Charles F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, *London*: Methuen, 1909, Chapter VII: "Science and Progress"; quoted after: ibidem, p. 134; Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 213.

350   Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, pp. 45–54.

351   Arthur James Balfour, *Decadence: Henry Sidgwick Memorial Lecture*, Cambridge: University Press, 1908, pp. 7–8.

and power of a state – for example, the Netherlands, Spain, or Venice – is caused by a variety of circumstances, but there is no proof of national decadence.[352]

Balfour admits that it is true that there have been historical cases where external or random causes cannot explain everything. The collapse of the Western Roman Empire – that greatest catastrophe recorded in historical sources – was one such occurrence. In fact, this very Empire did not lack means of defence or the ability to support the development and assimilation of the achievements of the many cultures that found themselves within its reach, Greek culture foremost among them. Still, the vulnerability of this powerful state to both internal and external threats was gradually and nearly imperceptibly growing; public life was overwhelmed with stagnation and indolence. We can call this process social degeneration or decadence, but does calling it that explain it?[353]

If the answer is yes, and if we know the fates of other dead civilizations, then how can we be certain that *our* civilisation should contrive to escape a like fate? There is no clear and conclusive answer. A supposition can be risked, though, that a civilisation's creativity is dependent not as much on the race's unchanging, hereditary characteristics, as it is on the society's acquired traits, its beliefs, traditions, rights, and mores, which either foster progress or hinder it. The point is, Balfour tells us, that our civilisation differs from all the preceding ones in that a new powerful force has appeared within it, namely, the alliance between science and industry. "That on this we must mainly rely for the improvement of the material conditions under which societies live is in my opinion obvious, although no one would conjecture it from a historic survey of political controversy. Its direct moral effects are less obvious; indeed there are many most excellent people who would altogether deny their existence." They would not agree that the new force has same ability to unleash energy and inspire societies to great deeds as is attributed to religion, patriotism, and politics. "Industrial expansion under scientific inspiration, so far from deserving praise like this, is in their view, at best, but a new source of material well-being, at worst the prolific parent of physical ugliness in many forms, machine made wares, smoky cities, polluted rivers, and desecrated landscapes, – appropriately associated with materialism and greed."[354]

And yet, this view is thoroughly erroneous, Balfour argues, as it makes the side effects the essence of the matter. Following such logic, the significance of religion could be reduced to narrow-minded bigotry and cruel persecutions, or

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352   Ibidem, pp. 10–13.
353   Ibidem, pp. 14–34.
354   Ibidem, pp. 48–49.

we should scorn patriotism because it oftentimes manifests itself in a vulgar, egoistic, or even criminal fashion. However, the opponents claim, religion and patriotism elevate human hearts towards higher purposes, whereas industry makes of knowledge merely a new moneymaking instrument. Well, such a view is basically unacceptable, for "I do not myself believe that this age is either less spiritual or more sordid than its predecessors. I believe, indeed, precisely the reverse." What is more, the allegation of the utilitarian usage of science misses the point. It is only through its application that science can exert an influence on the lives of people, the majority of whom are incapable of comprehending its discoveries. That civilisation has been undergoing all these transformations over the course of the last hundred years is not thanks to politicians. It was neither theologians nor philosophers who brought about a veritable revolution in our understanding of the Universe. It is science that "is the great instrument of social change, all the greater because its object is not change but knowledge; and its silent appropriation of this dominant function, amid the din of political and religious strife, is the most vital of all the revolutions which have marked the development of modern civilization."[355]

One cannot possibly grasp the long-term consequences of this great revolution. There was not yet a sociology capable of comparing the histories of various types of societies so as to assess what inhibits progress and what drives it, nor what conditions determine the influence of a higher civilisation on a less-developed one. For the time being, however, "as regards those nations which still advance in virtue of their own inherent energies, though time has brought perhaps new causes of disquiet, it has brought also new grounds of hope; and that whatever be the perils in front of us, there are, so far, no symptoms either of pause or of regression in the outward movement which for more than a thousand years has been characteristic of Western civilization," Balfour concludes.[356]

This defence of rationality and scientific-and-technological progress – rather unusual for a Tory – had little influence on the mindset, or perhaps just the manner of discourse, of the English elites, among whom the concept of national decadence had become common currency. In 1908, the same year Balfour criticised the arguments about decadence, General Robert Baden-Powell, Inspector-General of the Cavalry, embarked on a great and far-reaching task, originally intended to save the British Empire from the fate of Rome. The British misfortunes suffered during the South African campaign had affected him very deeply;

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355   Ibidem, pp. 49–56.
356   Ibidem, pp. 57–59.

this experience was later on complemented by an encounter with the aforementioned pamphlet, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* and by his acquaintance with the Government committee's reports on the poor physical condition of recruits. In the first edition of his *Scouting for Boys*, both a manifesto and a pedagogical guide, Baden-Powell wrote: "Recent reports about deterioration of our race ought to act as a warning to be taken in time before it is too late. One cause which contributed to the downfall of the Roman Empire was the fact that the soldiers fell away from the standards of their forefathers in bodily strength. […] The same causes which brought about the fall of the great Roman Empire are working today in Great Britain."[357]

Similarly, when Baden-Powell, together with his sister, was laying the ideological foundations for scouting for girls, their guiding premise was that "whilst the nation has been undermined by decadence, the girls can strengthen the Empire's forces, whether by preparing to do work in the Colonies or, if such need be, to do auxiliary service in defending Britain against invasion."[358] And thus scouting, one of the twentieth century's greatest pedagogical successes, with its methods for building character and encouraging patriotism, resourcefulness, and usefulness, was originally anchored in the conviction that the Anglo-Saxon race, or the English nation, had become physically and morally degenerated.

Pierre de Frédy, Baron de Coubertin's visions for the Olympic games were free of such nationalistic or imperial justifications, though even the French aristocrat and pedagogue was seeking an antidote to the purportedly degenerative effects of industrial civilisation. The revival of the classical ideals of beauty and noble disinterested rivalry was meant to enrich the character of man which had been corrupted by technology, specialisation, and capitalist competition. England, a country which had quite a record in education through sport and fair play, was quickly infected with Coubertin's noble passion, especially since it fell to London to host the Olympic Games in 1908.[359]

Common to a number of pedagogical ideas and concepts at the beginning of the century was the utopian idea of a sound society, free of wicked temptations and addictions, based on the conviction of the inevitable connection between physical fitness and healthiness, moral chastity, mental fitness, and economic success. This relationship would be true at the national level as well as for individuals. Whatever deviated from this ideal – be it the debility of malnourished

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357 Robert Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, London: C. Arthur Pearson Ltd., 1908, pp. 184, 295.

358 Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn*, p. 29.

359 Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, pp. 230–233; Briggs, "The 1890s", p. 169.

paupers or the sophistication of aristocratic dandies, anarchism or erotic passions – was sick, defiled, degenerate, *morbid*, in a word. A cold bath was the commonly recommended remedy.[360]

We know today how easily the otherwise innocent ideals of psychical education and gymnastics societies came to be associated with nationalist ideologies, including socialist ones, in Germany, above all.[361] France tried to promote its own, dissimilar style of physical culture as a way to rejuvenate the nation with the slogan "More athletes, fewer aesthetes!" coined in 1897 by Dr Philippe Tissié, author of the meaningfully titled work, *La fatigue et l'entrainement physique*.[362] It was therefore natural that British sport propagandists also willingly drew from claims supporting the clinical model of a crisis of the national culture and imperial patriotism.

All the same, it was popularly believed that all the pedagogical ideas and social reforms would be of little effect, if not downright counterproductive, since the influence of living conditions, environmental factors, and lifestyle on one's physical fitness, intelligence, and character was completely secondary. Hereditary features were the deciding factor. Meanwhile, even if industrial civilisation tends to reject and marginalise the maladjusted, there was nothing to prevent them from procreating. Worse, the reformers and philanthropists had taken them under their wings. The mechanisms of natural selection could no longer be counted on under these circumstances. In order to save the race from degeneration, and in the interest of future generations, for the sake of progress, an artificial, rationally controlled method of selection would be necessary, and this could only be assured by a vigorous state policy. The statistician Karl Pearson,[363] a student of Francis Galton who continued his research, was of the opinion that eluding this task would be a crime that would lead to the nation's biological degeneration.

In the first decade of the century, the dynamic eugenics movement, spreading from England throughout Europe and to America, broke out of the confines of the scientific laboratory, establishing educational societies, winning the support of biologists, physicians, psychologists, and laymen, and imposing its

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360 Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 168–169; Gilman, "Sexology, Psychoanalysis, and Degeneration", pp. 88–89.

361 See e.g. George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich,* New York: Howard Fertig, 1975, pp. 127–136.

362 Nye, "Degeneration, Neurasthenia", pp. 60–63.

363 Not to be mistaken for Charles Pearson, mentioned in the previous chapter.

language on the public debate.[364] The language was obviously soundly scientific, enhanced with the discoveries of the budding science of genetics and arguments of statistical biometry or anthropometry, disassociating itself from the harmful influences of sentimentalism and egalitarianism as they were not known to nature. No facts contradicting the thesis of progressive racial suicide could possibly deter the doctrine's zealots. The deeply pessimistic evaluation of England's social and demographic condition, balanced with a programme to rescue the country through the authority of experts, was also easily embraced by ex-liberal radicals and Fabian socialists who were naturally inclined to set the planned common good above the anarchic rights of individuals.

While the Fabian Society's reform programme had taken into account the needs of the "respectable working class" from the very start, its attitude towards deviants, the chronically unemployed, and the entire *industrial residuum* was, for the most part, social Darwinist. On this particular point Sidney Webb could agree with Karl Pearson, who considered himself a socialist, after all. Their shared concern was how to increase the reproduction of the "fit" classes and inhibit the reproduction of the "unfit" until their complete extermination.[365] George Bernard Shaw, who indefatigably mocked the hypocrisies of bourgeois moral conventions and their practical non-functionality, also seemed to have been lured by the idea of the rational planning of human reproduction.[366] After all, as Cecil Chesterton, another Fabian author, argued, "all progress, all empire, all efficiency, depends upon the kind of race we breed."[367]

Consistent eugenicists opposed any reformist programmes that did not clearly divide society into those who were of value and those who were not, and also did not give prominence to the regulation, using any and all means available, of the two groups' relative fertility; they saw it as the only means of saving British civilisation against its degeneration into an assemblage of epileptics, alcoholics,

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364   Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, pp. 75–78; Paradis, "Evolution and Ethics", p. 48; Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, p. 198.

365   Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 333; Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 111, 131–133; Soloway, "Counting the Degenerates", pp. 151–159.

366   Robert F. Whitman, *Shaw and the Play of Ideas,* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 275; Geoffrey Russel Searle, *Eugenics and Politics in Britain, 1900–1914,* Leyden: Noordhoff International Publishing, 1976, pp. 92–93.

367   Cecil Chesterton, *Gladstonian Ghost*, London: S.C. Brown Langham & Co., Ltd., 1905, p. 195; quoted after Daniel Grinberg, "Myśl polityczna wczesnych Fabian", *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej*, Vol. 25 (1979), 177; cf. also p. 189.

morons, criminals, and wastrels.[368] The eugenic correction of society's composition would require several generations, but this was nothing when the future of the Empire, the race, and the nation was at stake. The objections to such moral collectivism raised, for instance, by the Catholic Church in England and some intellectuals seemed in this perspective idle sentimentalism, if not superstition. Reflexes of compassion, Pearson argued, should be disciplined by reason and science, otherwise they would lead England straight to national disaster.[369]

The British eugenicists' only relative success in legislation was the 1913 act allowing for the forced isolation and sexual segregation of the mentally retarded. Yet, the influence of eugenic propaganda on the views of the intelligentsia was considerable and would have been even greater had the propaganda not been entangled with serious contradictions. The laws of genetics turned out to be much more complicated than they had seemed to Galton. In particular, the belief that intelligence and moral character go hand in hand with brawn proved untenable. If they did not go hand in hand or were not markedly correlated, pronouncing the social value of individual families or social classes would be highly problematic. Worse still, while the eugenicists needed a strong government and a long-term perspective for the purposes of their experiments, the democratic system could change political course every few years and the very strata they would have condemned to extinction would play a part in this. "What a gardener could achieve, if his tenure of office depended on the consent of the weeds!" Professor Galton asked.[370]

The eugenicists in Europe were widely divided in their opinions regarding the benefits of war. The dominant group among British eugenicists were the pacifists, who perceived war as, above all, the temporary or permanent exclusion of blue-ribbon genetic material – represented by young, healthy males and devoted patriots – from the reproduction process. That being the case, they reasoned, war further reduces the average fitness of the nation.[371]

Others were of the opinion that military service is eugenically useful as it sustains the ideals of physical fitness and courage, whereas war itself is irreplaceable as an efficient selection mechanism that eliminates weaker specimens and morally inferior nations. War is a law of nature, a movement, and life, as one British

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368   Searle, *Eugenics and Politics*, pp. 27–30, 60–62.

369   Ibidem, pp. 49, 113.

370   Ibidem, pp. 68–69, 80.

371   Ibidem, pp. 37–39.

general reasoned, and he was not alone, while an overly long period of peace without war leads to stagnation, collapse, and death.[372]

This difference of opinions reflected the eternal conflict of two contrary emotions: the fear of war and the cult of war with its mythical excitation. Only the learned rationalisations of both attitudes were new. Contrary to adherents of the pacifist movement, the proponents of these postures seemed to ignore the developing technology of remote mass killing and persisted in treating war as a knightly craft.

Seen against this background, *Human Nature in Politics*, an unusual book by Graham Wallas published in 1908, stands out. The book considered these dilemmas from a completely different angle and was an insightful attempt to create the basics of a theory of political behaviour in a liberal democratic system. Wallas, who was part of the right, liberal wing of the Fabian Society, nevertheless posed the question of why the system deals so poorly with taming the destructive forces of modern society. His reasoning led to the conclusion that the institutions of political democracy were based on the false assumption that human nature is rational.[373] Wallas's critique of this assumption was more subtle than that of the psychologists of the crowd. He investigated how patriotic feelings are created, and the roles language, symbols, songs, tales, and notions of invisible community play in the emergence and organisation of such sentiments. He scrutinised conflicts of national attachments in such areas as Lombardy or Galicia, and predicted that Italian and Polish patriotism would prevail, whereas Austria-Hungary would disintegrate, as it had not managed to develop a sufficiently strong symbolic structure to hold it together.[374]

The United Kingdom was facing a similar problem, as it has not even managed to coin or establish a name that would evoke shared emotional associations: "No Englishman is stirred by the name 'British', the name 'English' irritates all Scotchmen, and the Irish are irritated by both alike."[375] And what should one make of the expectation that a sense of community should embrace the Colonies and the Dependent Territories? Anyone willing to defer the inevitable maturing of their own emancipation strivings and instead develop an imperial egoism could only use a Bismarck-like method and ruthlessly exterminate any humanitarianism

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372 Ibidem, p. 36; Pick, *War Machine*, pp. 80–83.

373 Sugwon Kang, "Graham Wallas and liberal democracy", in Graham Wallas, *Human Nature in Politics*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1981, pp. VII–XIV.

374 Graham Wallas, *Human Nature in Politics*, London: Archibald Constable and Co. Limited, 1908, pp. 72–80.

375 Ibidem, p. 80.

which compels one to take account of the interests of one's subjects, not to even mention his opponents.

> If the policy of imperial egoism is a successful one it will be adopted by all empires alike, and whether we desire it or not, the victor in each inter-imperial war will take over the territory of the loser. After centuries of warfare and the steady retrogression, in the waste of blood and treasure and loyalty, of modern civilization, two empires, England and Germany, or America and China, may remain. […] Both will contain white and yellow and brown and black men hating each other across a wavering line on the map of the world. But the struggle will go on, and, as the result of a naval Armageddon in the Pacific, only one Empire will exist.

Then, perhaps, "the inhabitants of the globe, diminished to half their number, will be compelled to consider the problems of race and of the organised exploitation of the globe from the point of view of mere humanitarianism."[376]

But, can such developments be forestalled, Wallas asks, and can one start thinking globally, in advance, about the future of the human race? Can one imagine humanity not as a mosaic of homogeneous nations but as a biological group within which every individual, in line with the processes of organic evolution, preserves certain defining characteristics? Well, this is exactly the conclusion stemming from Darwin theory!

> But it was the intellectual tragedy of the nineteenth century that the discovery of organic evolution, instead of stimulating such a general love of humanity, seemed at first to show that it was for ever impossible. Progress, it appeared, had been always due to a ruthless struggle for life, which must still continue unless progress was to cease. Pity and love would turn the edge of the struggle, and therefore would lead inevitably to the degeneration of the species. This grim conception of an internecine conflict, inevitable and unending, in which all races must play their part, hung for a generation after 1859 over the study of world-politics as the fear of a cooling sun hung over physics, and the fear of a population to be checked only by famine and war hung over the first century of political economy.[377]

This is a very striking line of reasoning. Graham Wallas tackled social Darwinism, taking Darwinist assumptions as the point of departure – while, in fact, Darwinism offered no theoretical foundation for nationalist and racist ideologies. Wallas's polemic was directed at the apologists of war and expansion, such as the Governor of Madras who was credited with the claim that the struggle for survival had risen from levels of fighting between individuals, clans, and nations to the level of the clash of world powers. Wallas retorts,

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376   Ibidem, pp. 283–284.
377   Ibidem, pp. 286–287.

The exhilaration with which Lord Amphill proclaims that one-half of the species must needs slaughter the other half in the cause of human progress is particularly terrifying when one reflects that he may have to conduct negotiations as a member of the next Conservative Government with a German statesman like Prince Bülow, who seems to combine the teaching of Bismarck with what he understands to have been the teaching of Darwin when he defends the Polish policy of his master by a declaration that the rules of private morality do not apply to national conduct.[378]

Obviously, contrary to what the *strugforlifers* claimed, there was no evolutionary benefit to be gained from the struggle of races, empires, or civilisations. And here is where Wallas's argument takes a surprising turn: "The evolutionists of our own time tell us that the improvement of the biological inheritance of any community is to be hoped for, not from the encouragement of individual conflict, but from the stimulation of the higher social impulses under the guidance of the science of eugenics. […] [Eugenics might] indicate that the various races should aim, not at exterminating each other, but at encouraging the improvement by each of its own racial type."[379] Quite unexpectedly, eugenics is presented here as an alternative to social Darwinism and imperial policies, and is expected to help quash irrational racial hatreds. Eugenics, moreover, allows for, or even recommends, the crossing of races in lieu of inbreeding, although as Wallas maintains, one can envision the possibility of having the males and the females of some hopelessly backwards tribes placed on various islands in order to let them die out tranquilly.

It was important that an awareness of humanity's common goal be created along with a sense of common solidarity that would change world politics in its entirety:

We all of us, plain folk and learned alike, now make a picture for ourselves of the globe with its hemispheres of light and shadow, from every point of which the telegraph brings us hourly news, and which may already be more real to us than the fields and houses past which we hurry in the train. We can all see it, hanging and turning in the monstrous emptiness of the skies, and obedient to forces whose action we can watch hundreds of light-years away and feel in the beating of our hearts.[380]

Thus, the Enlightenment utopia of a united mankind returned, this time in a scientific setting involving the psychology and biology, and the physics and politics of the early twentieth century. We don't know for sure today whether that setting was merely a measure devised to reinforce the suggestive power of the argument

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378   Ibidem, p. 290.
379   Ibidem, p. 292–293.
380   Ibidem, pp. 295–296.

or whether this author really believed that a code of ethics and a history of the future could be derived from evolutionary theory.

This question, which we may recall had been contemplated by Thomas Huxley, became the key dilemma for English social philosophy at the century's turn. Its importance was based on the fact that the powerfulness of those new toys which the world, initially the Western one, had been given by its scientists, engineers, and industrialists for the first time manifested itself so palpably. The West saw itself as the sorcerer's apprentice who is capable of unleashing the elements, but it was unknown whether he could charm them to serve reasonable and proper purposes. And, whether he was willing to harness them at all.

For the time being, it could be seen with the naked eye that human creative genius was developing from year to year, whereas the mores did not show any considerable progress. The bold critic and reformer of English mores and morals, Havelock Ellis, when summing up the past century (as many others did), admitted that too much had been expected of science. Science certainly is the foundation of any civilisation but in itself offers no guidelines of conduct. "Science never taught the art of living, for a man who was a perfect instrument for scientific thought could yet remain on a lower moral level than the lowest of savages. And how little science could do for the other arts, the whole nineteenth century remains an everlasting monument."[381]

This dramatic disproportion between the demiurgic power and the ungovernable nature of mankind was an enormously rich source of ideas for literature, albeit not necessarily highbrow literature. The fantasy genre of science-fiction which cropped up exuberantly in the century's last decades exploited imaginary laboratory and technological experiments as a source of horror, thus creating a new variety of the alchemical and Gothic novel. The discovery and the applications of electricity opened an underground world for literature, one where the authors built entire cities and countries, illuminated and air-conditioned, developed and inhabited by a new human race to whom greenery, the sun, and the stars were unknown. The earth offered them shelter from the cataclysms of nature or from civilisation's annihilation, whilst inside it colonies of depersonalised beings swarmed, reduced to the functions allocated to them by the underground division of labour, waging bloody underground wars against one another, while remaining dependent on the life-giving machinery which could seize up and come to a halt. These narratives could draw at will from the rich well of mythological

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381 Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, London: Grant Richards, 1900, p. 49; quoted after: Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, p. 156.

associations the underground world had accumulated over the ages; nonetheless, in this technological variant, the world was completely artificial and mechanised – a vision of a fictive finale of the history of brilliant humanity and its alienation from its own creations.[382]

Not much has survived of this literature, nor of the stories of lunar travels and interplanetary wars featuring the then en-vogue Martians[383] – save for the works of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, the two immortal writers of classics in the genre. Not a pioneer, Wells made use of ideas already in circulation, but outran all the fantasy authors with the power of his imagination and the gravity of his ideological message. His early novels and utopian projects intertwine nearly all of the aforementioned ideas.

Considering Wells the creator of science fiction does not seem apt. Although he boasted that, in contrast to the majority of traditionally educated English writers, he had studied the genuine, that is, the natural sciences, his knowledge, earned at the Royal College of Science and complemented with independent study, was in fact a rather superficial patchwork of popular theories with Darwinism at the fore. But ideas such as the transformation of animal species within a couple of days by the surgical genius of skinning and transplanting organs into cattle, or a miraculous metal that would protect a space capsule against the effects of gravity, had little to do with any such popular knowledge or theory. The scientific and technological engines behind Wells' plots are usually described in a slapdash way, and it is clear that this author did not attach much importance to making them plausible. In the realms of politics and social history, however, Wells was a visionary. He readily passed himself off as a sociologist in his own understanding of the subject and methods of that young discipline.[384] His early novels are sociological fables.

Wells' first novel, *The Time Machine* (1895), was the best-known and most frequently analysed of his novels. It tells a story about where contemporary civilisation would arrive if natural evolution and social development continued on the path it has been on for another 800,000 years, and then a bit more. Humanity would split into two different species: the leisured class of the beautiful *Eloi* and the monstrous proletarian underground-dwelling *Morlocks*. The former would stroll and dance in the light of day amidst the blossoming orchards and gardens of their Schlaraffia, happy and carefree, remembering no past and thinking of no

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382 Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, pp. 112–114, 127–150; Pike, *The Image of the City*, pp. 36–38.

383 Schwartz, *Century's End*, pp. 180–185.

384 Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science*, pp. 149–154.

future, as all the problems of existence will have been solved by then, there no longer being any weeds, flies, or sicknesses. The latter would live in darkness, as they cannot bear light, awful and lousy; but it is they who keep the hidden machinery running, without which the world can no longer exist. And it is they, the subhuman caste thrown down into the nether regions, who would climb out in the night onto the earth's surface in order to hunt for the foolish Eloi whom they both support and feed upon.[385]

There are no marvels of technology: unless you count the velocipede made of aluminium tubes on which the Time Traveller – a fin-de-siècle do-it-yourself enthusiast – races through the millions of years. He observes a civilisation which had already passed its zenith, having achieved excessively grand success with full evolutionary adaptation to the world it had created, having reached a state of saturation. If there are no longer any challenges, there is no need to make an effort, and a phase of aesthetic decadence and the disappearance of will sets in: a great calm of humanity. Thus, when the Morlocks, in absence of better fare, start eating the Eloi they are not even capable of defending themselves.

But this is not the end of the story. Millions of years forward, there are no longer any humans but only some monstrous crabs with giant, continually moving pincers, and even further in the future, the Sun is cooling and the Earth is icebound, dark and empty. In the red rays of the sunrise, some round shape can be spotted in the brine: the tentacles of that monster thing "trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about."[386]

The maximised capitalist class stratification; the theory of a retrograde evolution that might be expected if there is no stimulating interaction between the species and its environment; Lord Kelvin's popularised prediction of a "heat death" of the Universe resulting from the inevitably growing entropy – are all brought together in this cosmological fable. One Wells expert called it an ironic myth, as it situates the idyll of a serene and blissful age at the end-stage of history, undermined, moreover, by the cannibalistic mechanics of the Underworld.[387]

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385 Herbert George Wells, *The Time Machine. An Invention*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1895; Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, pp. 124–125.

386 Wells, *The Time Machine*, p. 202 [the first quoted phrase did not appear in the original edition]; Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, pp. 95–97

387 Bernard Bergonzi, "The Time Machine: an Ironic Myth", in Bernard Bergonzi (ed.), *H.G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall, 1976; Robert M. Philmus, "The Logic of 'Prophecy' in *Time Machine*", in Bergonzi (ed.), *H.G. Wells*.

H.G. Wells' other early novels saw the phantasms of the degenerated world develop in various directions. The plot of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) takes place as if in contemporary times, in the year 1887, but repeats the pattern of two antagonistic parties, each degenerated in its own way. The psychopathic central character, a physician impervious to his own and others' pain, is obsessed with the idea of artificially accelerating evolution: "Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, 'This time I will burn out all the animal; this time I will make a rational creature of my own!'" For the time being, however, instead of rational creatures, he creates with his scalpel monstrous animal-human and hyena-swine hybrids, with rudimentary consciousness and speech, and confers on them a Law that is supposed to keep them obedient. An unguarded moment is enough, however, for his creatures to smell blood and for their maker to become the first victim of their orgiastic regression to animal nature.[388]

The dread of an evolution – natural or cultural, whatever the case – where only technical abilities and military discipline develop, rather than the ability to sympathise and feel compassion, or the maturity for freedom, or even the intellect is again invoked in the form of completely depersonalised Martians spreading panic in and around London with their death rays, feeding on transfusions of human blood, and finally defeated – not by humans but by microbes.[389] In another story, an explorer of the Moon tells us that the Selenites brilliantly surpass humans in their moral advancement and abilities in social organisation. Superior they are, perhaps, but later reports of the anatomical specialisation of these insects depending on the professional function they perform and of the stratification of the ruling elite into classes of administrators, specialists, and the erudite, raise doubt in the lunar utopian's enthusiasm for such an extremely rational a distribution of labour. The ceremonial audience graciously given to the comer from the Earth by the Grand Lunar, the absolute ruler of the Selenites, whose form is that of a disembodied brain, follows a rather preposterous protocol, but the conversation between the two bares the absurdities of civilisation – not the lunar one but its earthly counterpart.[390]

There was a certain ambivalence in all this. The ruthless, despotic, and quasi-totalitarian states concocted by Wells – like the one in which the Sleeper, awoken,

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388   Herbert George Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau. A Possibility*, New York: Stone & Kimball, 1896, p. 144.

389   Herbert George Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, London: William Heinemann, 1898; Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, pp. 172–184.

390   Herbert George Wells, *The First Men in the Moon*, London: George Bell and Sons, 1901.

found himself [391] – are obviously a frightening extrapolation of the statist political and economic tendencies that were just appearing in Europe around the year 1900 which were seen, to some degree, as the antithesis of Europe. Wells saw in the condition of Europe and above all, England, an unbearable liberal disorder with a breakdown of the hierarchy of values, lacking purpose and sense. Whereas any centralised organisation of a society, even if a brutal, contributed an orderliness and a sense of collective action, and if it was not a military dictatorship but an authoritarian rule of highbrows, experts, and planners, it seemed to be somewhat attractive to this author.[392]

These suppositions are verifiable owing to Wells' own declarations and predictions dating roughly from the same period which are necessarily more authoritative than his fabulous stories, where the author's ideological intentions may be subject to various interpretations.

First published in 1901, *Anticipations* was, in the author's design, a hypothetical sketch – a rather not-too-fanciful one, for a change – of the world's twentieth-century history. Read a hundred years afterwards, this essay leaves a stronger impression than the naïve, as they basically are, fantasy novels by the same author. The most powerful aspect of Wells' futuristic imagination is that he was one of the first to think truly globally, although his knowledge of the world outside England was rather poor; moreover, he sought to divine the crucial lines of development while avoiding purely political speculation. If we consider the fact that most of the forecasts from a century ago came before the first two decades had elapsed, the hypotheses formulated by Wells are strikingly keen.

His predictions regarding the ways in which the motor vehicle and underground railway would affect the development of urban agglomerations, or how technology would facilitate housekeeping and, alongside this, the emancipation of women, turned out to be astonishingly prescient. The key item in the sociological forecasts expressed in *Anticipations* was his conviction of the rapidly growing importance of a "new class" of intelligent professionals, specialists educated in various areas; it is they who would take control of public affairs, whether gradually or through revolution. Such a change in the governing elite would exert a decisive influence on the political system of England and the world.[393]

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391 Herbert George Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1899; Anthony West, "H.G. Wells", in Bergonzi (ed.), *H.G. Wells*, pp. 15–16.

392 Harpham, "Time Running Out", p. 299.

393 Herbert George Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1902, pp. 3–154.

At this point in *Anticipation*s, Wells begins a tirade against democracy as a system which in theory derives from the common will of the people but in practice is marked by the rule of the shrewdest, the voters remaining completely indifferent. Such a system is characterised by a profoundly shapeless public life and a lack of any common ideals. Having no principles, political parties limit themselves to offering up their own versions of patriotism and hatred of foreigners, which leads to nationalistic contests and the germ of an unavoidable great war. The war will be a total one, involving the entire population, but the outcome of the conflict will be determined by science and technology, support services, machine weaponry, military cruiser and steered balloon battles, and – quite soon, most probably in the first half of the century – *fighter aeroplanes*. It will then become apparent that the key to the future lies not in the hands of politicians, generals, or masses, for that matter, but in the hands of experts who will suddenly become aware of their value and the commonality of their purpose. Once this occurs, "this gray confusion that is democracy must pass away inevitably" – and the "world-state of the coming years" will come.[394]

At first it will be a nation state, for the embers of hatred will not flicker out so quickly. Specialists will nonetheless skilfully set about arranging things, and here it turns out that they are not the grateful students of Thomas Huxley (as might have been expected) but rather of Galton and Pearson. As Wells portends,

> the nation that most resolutely picks over, educates, sterilizes, exports, or poisons its people of the abyss […] the nation that by wise interventions, death duties and the like, contrives to expropriate and extinguish incompetent rich families while leaving individual ambitions free; the nation, in a word, that turns the greatest proportion of its irresponsible adiposity into social muscle, will certainly be the nation that will be the most powerful in warfare as in peace, will certainly be the ascendant or dominant nation before the year 2000.

Consequently, all the governments will, with time, be forced carry out segregation "to foster the power that will finally supersede democracy and monarchy altogether, the power of the scientifically educated disciplined specialist, and that finally is the power of sanity, the power of the thing that is provably right. […] But what tongue it will be, and what kindred that will first attain this new development," remains a far more complex question.[395]

There is no doubt that this path to power and the truth was not a forecast Wells would have made *contre coeur* but rather the opposite – it was his ideal

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394 Ibidem, pp. 92–116.
395 Ibidem, pp. 230–231.

vision of the future. As has been already mentioned, such projects of purging segments of the population sanctioned by science were discussed in salons during the early years of the twentieth century, and were even considered politically correct. Wells did not limit the purpose of such purges to reinforcing the strength of *his own* country. He definitely hated nationalism, considering it anachronous in a world where market and culture cross artificially set borders. He was willing to see British imperialism, like pan-Slavism, as a stage in the process of the unification of nations. Germany's rapacity was still an obstacle in this regard, but it would be ultimately defeated after a succession of horrific wars and incorporated into a federation of Western and Central Europe, beyond which there would remain for some time an East Asian empire and the worldwide English-speaking empire, with its main hub in the United States. These three powers would gradually grow closer, thanks to the coincident actions of their intellectual elites and great trusts which would enable talented and energetic people to extend control over the governments and, ultimately, rise to absolute power. At that point, the intelligentsia, cosmopolitan as they inherently are, would stamp out national hatreds and smother the hydra of war forever.[396]

These future selected intelligentsia will abandon outdated liberalism, as well as the Christian doctrine of the Fall and Redemption. Having abandoned empty metaphysical investigation, they would catch sight of God's magnificent plan in the sphere of their own actions.

> They will find in themselves […] a desire, a passion almost, to create and organize, to put in order, to get the maximum result from certain possibilities. […] The determining frame of their ethics, the more spacious scheme to which they will shape the schemes of their individual wills, will be the elaboration of that future world state to which all things are pointing.

Reconstructed in line with the guides of contemporary science, "the ethical system of these men of the new republic […] will be shaped primarily to favour the procreation of what is fine and efficient and beautiful in humanity – beautiful and strong bodies, clear and powerful minds, and a growing body of knowledge – and to check the procreation of base and servile types […]."[397]

Towards the end of the essay, we see a return to the obsessive idea of the extermination everything that is infirm and redundant, including children inheriting physical or mental illnesses. In terms of contemporary sensibilities, the reader

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396 Ibidem, 267–301.
397 Ibidem, 321–322.

will find these pages rather difficult to swallow. The visionary wrote, among other things:

> […] I do not foresee any reason to suppose that they will hesitate to kill when that sufferance is abused. And I imagine also the plea and proof that a grave criminal is also insane will be regarded by them not as a reason for mercy, but as an added reason for death. I do not see how they can think otherwise on the principles they will profess. The men of the New Republic will not be squeamish either in facing or inflicting death, because they will have a fuller sense of the possibilities of life than we possess. […] They will naturally regard the modest suicide of incurably melancholy or diseased or helpless persons as a high and courageous act of duty rather than a crime.

Using such a methods and by propagating preventive measures, the procreation of those sorts whose perpetuation in the world is not worthy would be limited, and humanity set will foot on the road to self-perfection, both spiritual and corporal.[398]

The New Republic would establish a common language and the laws to be shared by all the people. "And for the rest," Wells continued,

> those swarms of black, and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people, who do not come into the new needs of efficiency? Well, the world is a world, not a charitable institution, and I take it they will have to go. The whole tenor and meaning of the world, as I see it, is that they have to go. So far as they fail to develop sane, vigorous, and distinctive personalities for the great world of the future, it is their portion to die out and disappear.

For the purpose behind the world is something greater than human happiness. Whereas we know nothing about the immortality of individual souls, we do know that humankind is relentlessly heading "to that spacious future, of which these weak, ambitious *Anticipations* are, as it were, the dim reflection seen in a shallow and troubled pool. For that future these men will live and die".[399]

It was not with the intention to expose Wells' dark side that I have brought up this book which, despite the success it enjoyed, the author himself soon came to be ashamed of – and which Wells scholars are none too eager to revisit. It is worthwhile, however, to see to what extremes a progressivist idealism can lead when derived from radical and often even apt criticisms of the existing society and state – that it would accord future *specialists*, on the authority of the highly suspicious science of eugenics, the right to judge the usefulness or fitness of people, races, and nations in the name of worldwide progress, and the right to live or

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398   Ibidem, 324–325; cf. John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880–1939*, London: Faber, 1992, pp. 118–151.

399   Ibidem, pp. 342–343.

a sentence of death pursuant to such legitimacy. Such a perspective is appalling even without the knowledge of what occurred over the following half-century.[400]

An aversion to capitalism, a passion for planning the future, and belief in the leadership of experts led Herbert G. Wells to the Fabian Society, where he felt like an outsider, eventually leaving the group after a couple of years. Meanwhile, his impatient radicalism was tempered by his discussions with social democrats. A likeable trait in this man was that he frequently returned his earlier worldview declarations, revisiting and revising them. A Polish Wells scholar says that he experimented with his numerous utopias, considering none of them as conclusive or finally ideal.[401] In any case, the moral and political climate of the novel *A Modern Utopia* (1905) is much different from that prevailing in *Anticipations*.

It is different not only because Wells wanted to keep his imagination within the limits of psychological and technological realism when writing *A Modern Utopia*, assuming only that people would be capable of freeing themselves from time-honoured customs and laws whose authority had been, in any case, undermined. More importantly, we find here something that was missing in *Anticipations*, the ideal of the freedom of the sovereign individual, with his right to property and privacy, to distinctness and nonconformity, and the related postulate of the explicitly restricted rights of the state to intrude in issues of morality. There is something in the spirit of Mill or perhaps, Shaw in the statement: "one of the darkest evils of our world is surely the unteachable wildness of the Good."[402]

The utopia's economics (whatever the details of it) was an attempted compromise between the socialist concept of state control, on the one hand, and free enterprise and labour market, on the other. The state was to provide for every family's minimum sustenance, and those unable to work – drunkards, idiots, the incurably ill, and repeat offenders – would be isolated so they would be prevented from procreating but treated relatively mildly. Eugenics could not be abandoned completely; once the modern state has assumed ever-greater responsibility for the wellbeing of children, it has a reasonable right to decide *which* children it takes under its care, but nevertheless, it should approach this choice through a selective policy of family allowance or tax relief. Roughly speaking, it was a project of a global welfare state, moderate in tone and purposefully synthetic. In line with Wells' beliefs, full power in such a state would be handed to an order

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400   Cf. Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 93–95.

401   Juliusz K. Palczewski, *Utopista bez złudzeń: Herbert George Wells*, Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1976, p. 132.

402   Herbert George Wells, *A Modern Utopia* , London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1917, pp. 74, 201–202.

of Samurais whose members were to combine high intellectual and professional qualifications with the principles of strict morality and self-control, in line with their voluntarily acceptance of the highly demanding Rule.[403]

New to the picture was Wells' angry diatribe against racial prejudice of all sorts. He wrote that the world of his time had fallen into a sort of delirium regarding race and racial struggle; the English, Jewish, German, or Italian obsessions about the purity of their blood and the perils of its defilement were a fruit of "bastard science." He was always a true believer in a unity of the world but not in the sense of cultural pluralism or the celebration of diversity. On the contrary, like other eighteenth-century philosophers, his ideal was the development of a single universal language, uniform laws, a universal education of children, the mutual assimilation of morals and mores – in a word, a universal synthesis of all the cultures, political systems, and races within one world state. Only a synthesis of this kind, Wells believed, could bring about a lasting peace and dampen ambitions of domination. The only obstacles were the lack of imagination, dullness of mind, and envy characteristic of contemporary mentality: "the hostile, jealous patriotisms, the blare of trumpets and the pride of fools; they serve the daily need [of the crowds] though they lead towards disaster."[404]

In the end, this vision of Utopia dissipates like a dream. The narrator regains consciousness, finding himself in Trafalgar Square, amidst the hustle and bustle of ghastly commonness: "'I wish,' I shout against the traffic, 'I could *smash* the world of everyday.' […] This is a dream too – this world." The world that was to be negated by the "Modern Utopia."[405]

There is probably not much point in distinguishing the pessimistic and an optimistic periods of H.G. Wells' creative work; they are inseparable. His deepest doubts in human nature are warmed by his hope, while his enthusiastic belief in the future, in education, is cooled by doubt. Modernity, he believed, conceals in its bosom a grandness and beauty no man could ever have thought of; the hymns of someone like Ruskin in praise of simple human manual labour which is in fact degrading to man are pathetic and ridiculous.[406] But modernity is terrifying, for one must approach it and go with it through a sea of blood.

The outwardly still quite calm, if not serene, Edwardian period was laced with a sense of impending catastrophe. In the fervour of the grand investment projects and financial boom, in the glare of electricity and the progress of

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403   Ibidem, pp. 93–95, 140–145, 181, 255–299.

404   Ibidem, pp. 315–336.

405   Ibidem, pp. 343–347.

406   Cf. Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, pp. 167–169.

motorisation – in all this fascinating adventure of novelty – the writers, those eternal wet-blankets, sensed a dull fear, an uncertainty of the future, and even the odour of corruption.

Written after *A Modern Utopia*, Wells' *Tono-Bungay* (1908), a realistic novel based in contemporary times, recounted the story of the fantastic financial career and fall of Edward Ponderevo (Teddy), an upstart and snob whose entire business undertaking, the advertising and sale of a miracle cure, was a sheer humbug. A parable of English capitalism was quite rightly seen in this narrative. Significantly enough, the descriptions of a London gradually assuming enormous proportions, with its railway stations, factories, and ports, the monotony of identical houses along endless streets, referred time and time again to the metaphor of a cancer with its anarchic and pathological growth, which immediately brings the Romanticist authors and Dickens to mind. As if nothing had changed over the century – the disease is continually making progress! A perceptive literary critic would notice that the novel is permeated with images of collapse and could draw up a long list of descriptions not much different from my own list mentioned earlier.[407] It would include disorder, breakdown, degeneration, desolation, decay, swelling, and a host of other such words.[408] "Perhaps I see wrongly. It may be I see decay all about me because I am, in a sense, decay," says the narrator George Ponderevo, the speculator's nephew and confidant. All this hectic trade and construction, money-making, and the pursuit of life's pleasures seemed to him a frighteningly nonsensical waste of energy. "To others," he admitted, "it may be a scene of achievement and construction radiant with hope. I, too, have a sort of hope, but it is a remote hope, a hope that finds no promise in this Empire or in any of the great things of our time."[409]

The parable climaxes with George's voyage to Africa where he takes onboard a load of a valuable radioactive compound that destroys everything, sinking the vessel. George, the author's alter ego, survives and suddenly comprehends that the same thing is happening with "our old culture," that the social tissue of traditional norms and distinctions is decomposing: "I am haunted by a grotesque fancy of the ultimate eating up and dry-rotting and dispersal of all our world. So that while man still struggles and dreams his very substance will change and crumble from beneath him. I mention this here as a queer persistent fancy.

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407 See p. …… //This refers to the highlighted text on page 180 of this document//
408 David Lodge, "*Tono-Bungay* and the Condition of England", in Bergonzi (ed.), *H.G. Wells*, pp. 116, 134.
409 Herbert George Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, New York: Duffield and Company, 1909, p. 451.

Suppose, indeed, that is to be the end of our planet; no splendid climax and finale, no towering accumulation of achievements, but just – atomic decay!"[410]

With his inconsistencies, mood swings, welter of unfinished fictional and ideological ideas, H.G. Wells is singular. But this is precisely why he is an interesting case for historians of ideas, as his output – unlike anyone else's, perhaps – reveals the characteristic ambivalence of the attitudes of the modernist period both towards tradition and towards modernity: a belief in progress contrasted with convictions of decadence; fascination with technology and nostalgia for rural England; certainty of the perfect plasticity of human nature and of its inalterability; envisioning beautiful and sympathetic supermen in the wonderful future world versus ascribing to them the traits of cool and rationalised ruthlessness. Also, science – science, above all – was enticing with its promises of embracing the being as a whole and terrifying with its potential for destruction. But prophecies of the annihilation of civilisation, the horrible visions of war in the air, Martian invasion, rivers of fire and blood, and London in ruins, had an ambivalence to them as well, for besides the sense of warning and dread they inspired, one might suspect a barely stifled sublime and menacing apocalyptic thrill, if not glee, at the thought that a cataclysm might clean the filth and mildew of the world and prepare it for a new beginning – a Utopia, a Millennium.[411]

Who was free of such an ambivalence? Even Rudyard Kipling who was an enthusiast of the imperial mission and Service and who composed the Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer and sang praises of the Ganges bridges, the radio, aeroplanes, and the Royal Navy seemed to see the source of the nation's moral strength and sense of duty in a pre-industrial landscape of England which was fading into myth.[412] The most consistent modernisers were probably those who had constructed the bridges and vessels, those who bent over their microscopes and telescopes, but they had neither a taste for philosophical reflection nor the time for it.

At the other pole one could still find fanatics of the tragic nature of history. The most extremist among them was Henry Adams, an American patrician from Boston but European at heart. He and his brother Brooks, descendants of an old Puritan family that had given the United States two Presidents, grew up in what

410   Ibidem, p. 387; cf. Lodge, "Tono-Bungay", pp. 119–120, 134; Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, pp. 87–88.
411   Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, pp. 187–190; Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, p. 45, West, "H.G. Wells", p. 20.
412   Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, pp. 195–220; Wiener, *English Culture*, pp. 55–58.

Mark Twain called the Gilded Age, a time which seemed to them detestable in its vulgarity and nouveau riche manners. American democracy had corrupted the noble Anglo-Saxon ideal of liberty, degraded the ranks of civil service and public functions, and provided a screen for the financial oligarchs to hide behind.[413] The situation was not much better in Europe, but fortunately it had clearly entered a period of decline: "falling off of the birth-rate; decline of rural population; lowering of army standards; multiplication of suicides; increase of insanity or idiocy, of cancer, of tuberculosis; signs of nervous exhaustion, of enfeebled vitality, 'habits' of alcoholism and drugs, failure of eye-sight in the young, and so on, without end" – such were the everyday servings from the press.[414]

The problem shared by the Adams brothers was how should all this be explained theoretically. A lawyer and economist, Brooks was the first to come up with the idea of the law of civilisation and decay (a major impulse having been the stock-exchange panic of 1893). This was a new variant of the theory of historical cycles, with alternating phases of the accumulation of wealth, the main vehicle of social energy, and its dissipation. The accumulation phase was found to correspond with centralisation of political power – the dispersion of wealth, with the twilight of empires and civilisations.[415] Henry, historian and intellectual *pur sang*, was impressed by his brother's construction but could not consider it a satisfactory answer to the problem. He was a belated positivist of the Comtean sort, obsessed with the idea of establishing a homogeneous theory of everything, a law that governed both history and nature. But he was also a positivist who had read Hartmann and Schopenhauer, Bergson, Le Bon, and several dozen of other European pessimists; moreover, he was incredibly well-read in physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology. The theory of evolution did not fit his own vision of history, as it was associated with progressive interpretations. Adams found revelation in the second law of thermodynamics, on which he based his scientific theory of history, which he expounded in his extensive *Letter to American Teachers of History*, written in 1910.[416]

Thus, vital energy and social energy, which is identical with will or instinct, is subject to the law (Thomson's or Lord Kelvin's statement), just as physical energy. Hence, the history of mankind is a process of the never-ending diffusion

413   Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 147–169.

414   Henry Adams, "A Letter to American Teachers of History, 1910", in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919, pp. 186–187; cf. Harpham, "Time Running Out", p. 295.

415   Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, pp. 170–173; Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, p. 68.

416   Adams, "A Letter", pp. 135–263.

of primary energy, or creative force, and consequently, as the human mind, reason and thought evolve, the will weakens and character deteriorates. Signs of the apparent progress of civilisation obscure the uncontrollable process of degradation, the disappearance of differences and creative genius, the transformation of democratic societies into featureless and nondescript bodies, and the proliferation of their degenerated forms. The laws of science are inexorable. Entropy sets in and increases, natural resources run out, and a time will come of stagnation and cold in the world.[417]

Henry Adams's treatise can be considered a *summa* of the Anglo-Saxon cultural pessimism of the turn of the century since this author's erudition and negativistic passion made use of nearly every available source – apart, perhaps, from Nietzsche, who was much more significant in contemporary British literature but left only traces in Adams works. Generally, England's intellectual and artistic life had its own rhythm, distinct from that on the Continent; its relative isolation ended around 1910 according to some scholars, while others say it that it only followed the Great War.[418]

With all their variety, the excerpts and summaries presented in this book, though far from complete, are striking in their conviction, unspoken in most cases but nonetheless clear, that the drama of history plays out and is determined beyond the reach of human intervention. The socialist way of thinking was obviously different, but not many of them made their way into our survey. Yet, it is perhaps since the appearance of Samuel Butler's satirical utopia that the image of a rushing train without a driver, or with an impassive driver, has been a recurring theme in English literature.[419] If one was to strictly stick to the logic of this metaphor, one could say that the direction had been set but it remained unknown whether the iron-horse of history would crash or simply come to a halt in the middle of a desert.

Meanwhile, the train took on speed and the passengers were only then learning that they had used to live a slow and safe life in times of yore. "The tension between a speeding reality and a slower past generated sentimental elegies about the good old days before the rush. It was an age of speed but, like the cinema, not always uniformly accelerated. The pace was unpredictable, and the world,

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417   Ibidem, passim.
418   Orwell and Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, pp. 229–240; Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, pp. 335, 346–348.
419   Samuel Butler, *Erewhon, or Over the Range*, London: Trübner & Co., 1872, pp. 196–197; Pick, *War Machine*, pp. 106–108.

like the early audiences, was alternately overwhelmed and inspired, horrified and enchanted," one historian wrote.[420]

I have been listening mostly to the voices of those who were horrified rather than enchanted, which certainly cannot do justice to their actual proportions – all the more so, as it is not the misanthropists who push history forward. I have chosen this topic because I was intrigued by this pessimism and its actual sources. True, I could have used a stronger argument, repeating after Eugen Weber that "We tend to pay more attention to those who predicted the worst, because we know it came."[421] That wouldn't be entirely true, however, for even the most incisive minds could not have possibly guessed what sort of fate people could still deal to other people. Their fears were caused – with some exceptions – not really by nightmarish ideas or projections but by everyday life in an ever-more comfortably organised world which, as many of them believed, having acquired knowledge and might, had lost its soul and, together with it, its mind and health. All of which it had had earlier on, we may presume. Whatever the case, the worm of doubt bored its way steadily through the entire Victorian and Edwardian periods, as we have seen, and even infected enthusiasts of science and technology. It did not creep out into the world only with the generation of Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and T.S. Eliot, as we are at times told.

Without this injection of bitterness, without the cautionary cry, what would it be worth to be intoxicated with the age's novelties, with the vastness of the broadening horizon? No more than the predictions of cheerful soothsayers. And there were many of them, one of whom, for example, wrote in 1900 for the *New Century Review*: "To be a young man at the beginning of the twentieth century and to see all these miracles that the century will most certainly reveal is, probably, the greatest blessing and the most commendable privilege." But this is nothing, the best is yet to come at the end of the twentieth century. We can take US Supreme Court Justice David J. Brewer at his word when he said in 1899: "What can describe man as he will be when he writes 1999? Fancy forgets her cunning and imagination's wings are not strong enough to soar to a full conception of what he shall then be."[422] Oh, really?

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420 Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, p. 130; cf. Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras*, p. 65.

421 Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle*, p. 243.

422 Quoted after: Schwartz, *Century's End*, pp. 158, 167.

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