3-1-2011

The Decline of Civilizations: W.B. Yeats' and Oswald Spengler's New Historiography of Civilization

Stephen M. Borthwick
sborthwick9@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol64/iss64/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Decline of Civilization: W.B. Yeats’ and Oswald Spengler’s New Historiography of Civilization

Stephen M. Borthwick
Sborthwick9@gmail.com
smborthwick@uchicago.edu

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”

Decline of Civilization

“The Second Coming” is one of William Butler Yeats’ shorter poems, but it is nevertheless one of his most exemplary. It is marked both by Yeats’ unique situation in history as well as his common experience with his contemporaries. The notion of decline of civilization was a very popular one during the days when Yeats composed this poem, as well as his far less circulated work A Vision, creating a cyclical course of history which sees the repeated rise and fall of great civilizations. Though many spoke of similar decline, few proposed so similar a system to that found in A Vision as did Oswald Spengler, who was still an unknown high school teacher in the Harz Mountains when he conceived his own work, ominously titled Der Untergang des Abendlandes—translated by C.F. Atkinson as The Decline of the West.

Spengler’s magnum opus appeared in English a year after Yeats published his own work privately among a few friends. He was at the time aware that Spengler had published a book, but was unable to read him and was not knowledgeable of its
In spite of this, the works follow an extremely different path and draw practically the same conclusions. The two men had, separately and independently, offered a contribution to the view of history and of our very understanding of civilizations, and in so doing offered a solution to the problems of their age—problems encapsulated by Albert Camus in his declaration that “There is only one truly serious philosophical problem: suicide.”

The world into which Spengler and Yeats were born was one of an already unsteady optimism that was finally brought to ruin by the First World War, giving birth to the world in which the men would write their great works. This has led to many proposing that in fact the works of Yeats especially reflect the same despair and pessimism growing from the Great War that made Spengler so popular. Indeed, by proposing a cyclical answer to history and time that was defined in its late stage by decline, Spengler was upsetting the established notion of a linear, forward march of history toward an ultimate, positive termination, and therefore very timely in his thoughts. Likewise, Yeats would comment on the pre-war era: recalling a friend telling him that the twentieth century would hold neither war nor poverty, he remarked after the war that such optimism “is all gone...we are not certain the world is growing better.”

After close inspection of the two works, however, it seems too easy to say that their conclusions were merely the result of environment and Zeitgeist. Rather, there seems a much deeper sense of contemporaneity in history for them, the establishment of the Civilization as a type, and a commonality of all Civilizations throughout history in their natural growth and decline. Their project is not merely pessimistic despair or an attempt to rescue a shattered Civilization—it is a new vision of history, a broader vision of history, in which the Great War is not a great catastrophe but a necessary step. All authors, of course, find themselves influenced by their times; Yeats and Spengler, however, are among the authors inspired by the events in their lifetimes, but not responding to them: they do not belong exclusively to their own time, but through their writing offer answers to the problems not only of their age but also of days gone

---

2 A fact which would become apparent to Yeats only after he had the chance to read Spengler’s work in its entirety some years after publishing A Vision, and which would lead him to write a new version of A Vision in 1937.
4 See Lucy McDiarmid, Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol64/iss64/4
by and times yet to come.  

To best understand Spengler and Yeats as individual realizations of this theory of Civilizations in cyclical history, this work will look at A Vision of 1925 and Der Untergang des Abendlandes individually, and then consider A Vision of 1937 briefly. The goal is to show the works in their “pure” state, and also to challenge the proposal that they were merely the results of the authors’ cultural milieu, part of a broad despairing response to the World War.

**Der Untergang des Abendlandes**

Yeats believed when he read Spengler that he had found a kindred spirit, and that, either in a purely metaphorical sense or in a far more explicitly mystical sense—the latter being somewhat typical of Yeats—the minds of the two authors had been linked and they had received the same message from the same muse, called to write in almost the fashion of the evangelists—Spengler worked in the midst of war declaring clairvoyance for the problems that would arise with the war’s conclusion, regardless of the victors—He also worked in the midst of a long history of German great minds of social thought, history, and philosophy, and as a voracious reader would encounter great writers both through formal schooling and private reading. Chief among these are three men: Leopold von Ranke, G.W.F. Hegel, and Ferdinand Tönnies.

The first, Ranke, wrote a history which belongs to a very specific school of historical

---

6 They were also not alone in this; their contemporaries, the philosophers Wittgenstein and Heidegger, were also proposing new metaphysics and new hermeneutics that, they held, were meant to sweep aside their predecessors and begin work with something entirely new. Yeats and Spengler likewise propose a reconfiguration of history, as will be shown.

7 Callan, “Learned Theban,” 595.

8 Nevertheless, Spengler foresaw wrong regarding the victors of the World War he was experiencing, writing that “I attach only the wish only this book might not stand entirely unworthy alongside the military achievements of Germany.” Spengler, Untergang, x.

9 These includes historians and historiographers dating from the early nineteenth century and in which the giants of the field, both famous and infamous, stand: G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Heinrich von Treitschke, Leopold von Ranke, Heinrich Friedjung, among others, as well great German philosophers and social thinkers dating even further back and starting, not with the rational Kant, but with the intuitive and romantic, sometimes quasi-mystical writings of Goethe, following to Nietzsche, Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, and still more. More can be said of Spengler’s influences, and has been said in the works of Farrenkopf and Fischer on the subject, but a brief discussion of chief influences will be sufficient for our purposes.

The influence of two through formal schooling would be especially marked, both being at the height of academic popularity during Spengler’s youth. Ranke died when Spengler was only 6 years old; Tönnies’ was thirty years Spengler’s senior, but died the same year as he—an almost exact contemporary to Yeats, in fact. Thanks partly to Humboldt, Ranke held an elevated place in the German academy throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Tönnies’ seminal work Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft was published first in 1887; Spengler entered the Latina school in 1891.
inquiry, dependent on objectivity and a slice of historical fact drawn from primary source-work with bearing only on that exact moment in history, showing things wie es eigentlich gewesen, as he proclaims in his 1824 work *History of the Latin and Teutonic Peoples, 1494-1514*. For all his efforts at objectivity in history, he was a firm believer in the balance of power of nation-states, and his loyalty to this state philosophy bleeds through in his writing. He is significant to Spengler in that both men sought to broaden historical inquiry into an objective rather than national project; Spengler was certainly beholden to the school of narrative historicism that Ranke would found, inasmuch as his project was heavily criticized by more loyal Rankeans than himself. Spengler’s other major historical inheritance was G.W.F. Hegel, who stood with Ranke in his typical nineteenth century fascination with the nation-state but offered a view completely opposed to Ranke’s objective, slice-of-history approach, a view which promised the ability to see the future in the past—the same task Spengler sets for himself. Furthermore, like Hegel, Spengler’s history is a designated march to a designated end: for Hegel, the “end of history” is a progressive, linear movement from antiquity to modernity and the pinnacle of mankind’s development.

As much as Spengler reflects Hegel and Ranke as historical predecessors, his views of the organism of society bear the marks of Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies summarizes his project in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in the very first page, saying “The connection will be understood either as real and organic – this being the nature of the Gemeinschaft – or in an ideological and mechanistic form – this being the notion of Gesellschaft” and further describing the difference between the two by

---


11 This belief has earned Hegel accusations of arrogance and stubbornness, among other things, from detractors. He would pass the view onto his student Karl Marx, who proclaimed the same progression, but from a strictly economic view, of modes of production through history, culminating in the elimination of alienation and the realization of Species-Being in Communism. Spengler differs here in two ways: while the given lifespan of a Cultural organism can be viewed as linear, it is a downward motion rather than the upward motion Hegel and Marx see; further, there is no single linear history of all mankind, the way Hegel and Marx see it—on the contrary, Spengler echoes Goethe, declaring that “‘Mankind’ is a zoological concept or merely an empty word.” He derives this notion from Goethe, who says in a letter to Heinrich Luden (†1847), “‘Die Menschheit’? Das ist ein Abstraktum. Es hat von jeher nur Menschen gegeben und wird nur Menschen geben.” (“‘Mankind’? It is an abstraction. There have only ever been men and will only ever be men.”) Spengler, *Untergang*, 28.

12 Tönnies’ famous work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* would practically found the discipline of sociology, influencing both Max Weber's seminal *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as well as Emile Durkheim’s functional theories of society. He has, nevertheless, been accused of espousing a *völkische* Romanticism in his characterization of the Gemeinschaft versus the Gesellschaft, an influence which was permeating in the late nineteenth century in Germany and can also be seen in several places in Spengler’s work.
saying that, "all that is familiar, private, living together exclusively (we find) is understood as life in a Gemeinschaft. Gesellschaft is the public sphere, it is the World." One can see this very same distinction in Spengler’s communal, agrarian Kultur passing into individualized, urban Zivilisation.

The contrast of the organic with the artificial, the personal with the impersonal, and the village with the city runs throughout Spengler’s whole structure. Spengler’s vision is two-fold: both the binary progression of Culture crystallizing and stagnating into Civilization as well the four-phase life cycle that all Cultural organisms follow. Describing this, Spengler uses two sets of terms: organic terms, describing the actual birth, growth, decline, and death of the Cultural organism as a life form, and the fatalistic language for which he has been so criticized: he declares “Civilisation is the inevitable doom of a Culture.... Civilisations... are a completion; they follow the becoming as the become, life as death”.

These Cultural organisms are detailed in three tables he includes in his work: the first details the passage of Spring-Summer-Autumn-Winter, which for the Occident begins in 900, after the Carolingian period and the final death of the Classical Civilization, and ends (or begins to end) with modernity, completing the roughly thousand-year lifespan which Spengler assigns to his Civilizations. Each Civilization has a symbol which accompanies it in the first phase, which is usurped and replaced by another Culture with a completely foreign symbol and therefore an utterly foreign “world-feeling”. In addition, Spengler sees a phenomenon of a sort of mutation of certain

13 Ferdinand Tönnies, Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (Berlin: Karl Curtius, 1912), 3-4. N.B.: The proper rendering of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in English is highly disputed among translators; the former is often translated as “community” but may also be understood (perhaps more clearly) as “communion”, while the latter is rendered both as “society” and “association,” with the latter being favoured in recent scholarship. See Ferdinand Tönnies: A New Evaluation, ed. Werner J. Cahnman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973).

14 It is also important to bear in mind that the key to the Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft schema is two-fold—both the contrast of the private with the public spheres as well as the organic with the artificial—when considering Spengler’s own contrast of the representative of Kultur, which is the “country-town” with the representative of Zivilisation, which is the megalopolis.

15 Spengler, Untergang, 43. The central concept here—Werden and Gewordene, “becoming” and “become”—are ideas for which Spengler is deeply indebted (as he admits) to Goethe, and play strong role in the contrast he makes between the vivacious, developing Culture and the stagnant, crystallized Civilization.

16 For the West it is infinite space; for the Egyptian, the long corridor; the Semitic, the cavern; the Greeks, the idealized statue, etc. Spengler also specifically names three of the “souls” of these organisms with especial bearing on the Occident. The West itself is “Faustian” defined by Goethe’s own character and his constant outward-reaching for knowledge and more; Antiquity, which the West has replaced, is “Apollonian”, a term readily borrowed from Nietzsche, defined by the Nietzschean Apollonian rationality and thirst for worldly perfection; finally, the Semitic, being Jewish, Christian, etc. is a sort of mixed Cultural organism called “Magian”, after the mystics who visited the birth of the Christ-child, and is defined by the preoccupation with essence rather than space.
Cultural organisms, which owes its existence to a process Spengler describes in the second volume of Decline. He asserts in the first volume that the “Arabian soul was cheated of its maturity—like a young tree that is hindered and stunted in its growth by a fallen old giant of the forest,” but after critiques of the work began to circulate back to him, realized that this was inadequate to explain the phenomenon. He therefore suggests a parallel with mineralogy, pointing to the phenomenon of “pseudomorphosis”, by which volcanic molten rock flows into spaces left by washed away minerals in the hollows of rocks; likewise, since the Arabian culture’s pre-historical period is encompassed by Babylonian Civilization, and later as it develops it is stunted by Antiquity with the Roman conquest of Egypt.

This is the structure within which the subject of Spengler’s title exists. It is a gradual growth and death of a specific species of life-form, rather than the apocalyptic vision his title suggests. He is not, therefore, discussing a cataclysmic event that would bring about the end of Western civilization, though no doubt much of the appeal of his work was the recent catastrophe of the Great War. What he sees instead is a general inadequacy in the trends coming out of his contemporary West, which the Great War only compounded. Western (“Faustian”) civilization had come to stagnate with the rise of bourgeois economists; as he says, “a desperate struggle runs through the economic history of every Culture, which is waged by the soil-rooted tradition of a race, its soul, against the spirit of money”. He speaks of “the sword” being triumphant over money-power and finance capital, bringing about the final period during which violence of spirit triumphs. This period is marked by the rise of the “Caesars”, dictators who will bring about a Western World Imperium that Spengler envisioned being headed by Germany.

17 Spengler, Decline, 212.
18 Spengler, Decline, 191-192. Spengler sees a similar occurrence with the Russian Culture, which is pressed between the Faustian Culture and the Asiatic hordes which repeatedly conquer it. He maintains even in his last work, Jahre der Entscheidung, that the Bolshevist revolution represented a part of this pseudomorphosis that Russia is experiencing: “Asia has conquered Russia back from ‘Europe’ to which it had been annexed by Peter the Great.” He doesn’t, however, make clear what the implications of Stalin’s “modernization” policies and the five-year plan might be. Oswald Spengler, Jahre der Entscheidung (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1933), 43.
19 Spengler remarked on his title at length in an essay titled “Pessimismus?” (“Pessimism?”) appearing in the Preußischer Jahrbücher in 1921: “But there are men who confuse the downfall [literally “going under”] of Antiquity with the sinking of an ocean liner. The notion of a catastrophe is not contained in the word. If one said—instead of downfall—completion, an expression that is linked in a special way with Goethe’s thought, the “pessimistic” side is removed without the real sense of the term having been altered.” Oswald Spengler, “Pessimismus?” in Rede und Aufsätze (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1937), 63-64.
20 Spengler, Untergang, 1167. N.B. The notion of “race” here should not be understood as a biological concept but a broad term for a cultural unit.
21 It is worth noting that John Farrenkopf believes this to remain an accurate prediction for America, which Spengler himself discounted, as did most Europeans at the time, as an adolescent child of Europe, hardly capable of contributing to Faustian Civilization in any great way.
It is, at last, important to note that while Spengler offers this structure that explains history, it is not his intent to “save” the Occident. He participated in politics that would, in his view, further the progression of Faustian Civilization out of its Autumn and into Winter, but, in true Nietzschean fashion, he encourages his readers to adopt an amor fati (love of one’s fate) toward the decline of their Civilization.22

A Vision

Spengler and Yeats were both men who examined individuals—like Goethe, neither was concerned with “mankind.” They differed, however, in what individuals they examined—for Spengler, the focus was the individual organism of a Culture/Civilization. For Yeats, the individual was more specific; indeed, the whole of Book I of A Vision is dedicated to the twenty-eight phases of a man on Yeats’ Great Wheel. This is not, however, the deepest point of the cyclical view for Yeats—the individual cycle can only be revealed broadly. It is revealed, for example, to the Caliph, who is representative of Yeats’ audience, the conventional thinkers, and of the received opinion that denied Yeats’ beloved mystic wisdom and artistic freedom. Evidence of this might be found both within A Vision and in Yeats’ own experience.23

It is of great import, therefore, what the Caliph can learn and what the Caliph cannot learn—the greater the occult, the greater the importance. The Caliph can learn, and does learn, the nature of the man, the individual, and the twenty-eight phases of the Great Wheel. These twenty-eight phases of the individual have Four Faculties

22 Indeed, the hope one retains after reading Spengler is of a peculiar kind—since all Civilizations are destined to wither and die, the Faustian man should embrace the destruction of the Occident with an eye to the subsequent Cultural organism that will take its place, which Spengler predicts will be Russian, a society which due to close contact to both the Occidental and Asian Civilization organisms has not been able to come into itself—in short, it is not yet Werden, existing in the historyless period that marks the beginning and end of every Civilization.

23 As early as the 1890s, his occultist stories (such as “Out of the Rose”) were displaying a contrast of, in Foster’s words, “the illuminati few and the ignorant many.” He drew criticism from Irish circles in Dublin for his new departures in the 1890s and by 1910 he had almost completely broken with the Irish nationalists at the National Theatre in Dublin through his support of J.M. Synge and opposition to the narrow-mindedness he saw in the Roman Catholic, nationalist bourgeoisie. It is not so great a leap to see the bourgeois nationalists in the Caliph, who puts to death all who were unintelligible to him. In A Vision itself, there is further evidence of this, in the “Desert Geometry” of Kusta ben Luka: “The parchment will disclose to some learned man// A mystery that else had found no chronicler// But the wild Bedouin.” Further, Yeats may have inserted his own rejection by nationalist circles in recounting the death of the Vizir Jaffer, “Seemed so on purpose, muttered Jaffer’s friends,// That none might know that he was conscience struck—// But that’s a traitor’s thought.” The poet is forever the outsider in this poem, written in 1923; the outsider, the holder of wisdom, reflects not only Yeats’ rejection, but also the self-exile of several colleagues he admired, including Joyce and Pound, the latter of which would receive a special dedication in the 1937 version of A Vision. Foster, Yeats, I, 129, 402-432; W. B. Yeats, A Vision (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1925), 121, 122.
associated with them: the Will, the Creative Mind, the Body of Fate, and the Mask.\textsuperscript{24} The Body of Fate and the Creative Mind are in tandem insofar as they are defined by Yeats as both “predominately Solar or primary”; the Will and Mask, on the other hand are “predominately Lunar or antithetical.”\textsuperscript{25} We might de-mystify these terms (though Yeats would certainly oppose such an effort) to make them more comprehensible and more psychological by terming them thus: “drive” for Will, “ideal” for Mask, “intellect” for Creative Mind, and “existence” for the Body of Fate.\textsuperscript{26} All of these concepts—Will, Mask, Creative Mind, and Body of Fate, act like the poles of a magnet; Will and Mask always exist at opposite points on the Great Wheel (e.g. “A man whose Will is at Phase 17 will have... his Mask at Phase 3) and likewise of Creative Mind and Body of Fate.\textsuperscript{27}

However, the truth of the Wheel beyond this point—that is to say, the truth of that within which the man exists—remains obscured from the Caliph and the many. In explaining this, Yeats turns to Heraclitus.\textsuperscript{28} He introduces the second central symbol to his system: the constant motion of time in a line encountering a plane—forming the ever expanding/contracting gyre—feeds the eternal cycle of the man, who is driven by intellect, tying this back to the twenty-eight phases mentioned earlier.\textsuperscript{29} Again, also, there is the peak and valley, for the cone (the physical manifestation of the gyre) may represent an individual or general life. “When general life,” Yeats declares, “we give to its narrow end... the name Anima Hominis, and to its broad end... Anima Mundi;” and this structure must in fact be replicated and super-imposed over itself, since souls do not exist but in the binary; the binary Yeats establishes is Fate and Destiny—both defined by their relationship to the Will.\textsuperscript{30}

The mystic language and occult fascination of Yeats’ work contrasts with Spengler’s far more scholarly (albeit poetic) approach to his system, not only in that it is far less academic in tone but also in that it is an infinitely more complex expression of the ideas found in both. In spite of the mysticism and the complexity, however, Yeats and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] By “drive” is meant the German sense of Drang, which is an uncontrolled and, indeed, controlling drive toward an undefined end. In addition, a comparison of Yeats might be made to Tönnies, highlighting further similarity with Spengler: the Will might be considered the equivalent of what Tönnies dubs the Wesenwille, which is the driving will behind the Gemeinschaft, rendered as the “natural” or “essential” will, while the Mask might be considered likewise equivalent of what Tönnies calls the Kürwille, the driving will behind the Gesellschaft, rendered the “rational” or “arbitrary” will. Yeats, A Vision (1925), 16.
\item[27] Yeats, A Vision (1925), 129.
\item[28] The mention of Heraclitus is supremely interesting here; Spengler’s doctoral thesis at the University of Halle, which contained some of the foundational concepts of his later Untergang, focused on the philosophy of the “weeping philosopher.” His fascination, as well as Yeats’ fascination, may have to do with Heraclitus’ obsession with the obscure.
\item[29] Yeats, A Vision (1925), 129.
\item[30] Yeats, A Vision (1925), 129-130.
\end{footnotes}
Spengler are expressing the same ideas. Yeats makes the two cones, laid over one another, and the interplay of Anima Hominis with Anima Mundi, of Mind and Will, and of Fate and Destiny of supreme import when discussing the eventual history that he discusses in “Dove or Swan” (Book III of A Vision). This binary structure is paralleled with Spengler’s contrast of Kultur (as Destiny, equated by Yeats to Mask, as Will, above equated to the Wesenwille—the natural or essential will—and creating Dionysian Beauty) to Zivilisation (as Fate, equated by Yeats to Body of Fate, which holds subject to it Mind or Creative Mind, above equated to the Kürwille—the rational or arbitrary will—which finds Apollonian Truth). The binary structure parallel with Spengler’s Cultural organism also contains a four-fold parallel to Spengler’s seasons, since the Four Faculties are associated with the four cardinal phases of the moon—Full, Waning, New, and Waxing—and therefore are temporal as well as spiritual. Everything in A Vision is nothing more than a restatement of this system.

It is in history that the most explicit similarities between Yeats and Spengler are to be found. There is a movement in Yeats first of all from “barbaric and Asiatic” to “civil order” and from tribal thought to independent thought—i.e. from communal to individual experience. However, ex nihilo nihil fit: the tribal existence, the barbarism, replaces (or “refutes” in Yeats’ words) an older civilization—as Yeats suggests the Greek culture did to Babylonian. The Greek Civilization dies for Yeats with Alexander, when he has reached the peak of his conquests and has nothing more to achieve. This is the course of naked barbarism to primitive civil order to the clothed intellectual zenith to robed exhaustion and the triumph of naked force again—just as the individual enters the world a naked child and leaves it in the same state, so too of civilizations. For Yeats, the phase between 1875 to 1927 marks the twenty-second phase of the Great Wheel, the same phase defined in Greek Civilization by Alexander, in Roman Civilization by Charlemagne; “at Phase 22 always war, and as this war is always a defeat for those who have conquered, we have repeated the wars of Alexander.”

31 Yeats, A Vision (1925), 136, 138. The Nietzschean terminology is not quoted from Yeats, but the parallel cannot be ignored.
32 Yeats, A Vision (1925), 181.
33 Yeats, A Vision (1925), 181.
34 Yeats, A Vision (1925), 184. Alexander acts as a symbol for the exhausted civilization itself; he points to the “delight in technical skill” as further representative of this, since raw force replaced intellect—in Spenglerian terms, as Rome took over Greece the Greeks entered a “historyless” period. Also, there are similarities between Spengler’s exhausted Culture passing into Civilization—likewise one sees in Spengler the end of Apollonian Culture with what is called “Hellenic Culture” and Greek colonization. Spengler draws the parallel here between the Classical Culture’s Alexander period and the “new Imperialism” of the 19th century, with Napoleon as Alexander and Cecil Rhodes as the earliest predecessor of the Caesars (Sulla, perhaps?).
35 Yeats, A Vision (1925), 209-210. Significant here is that Roman Civilization and Greek Civilization, like in Spengler, are divorced from Western Civilization.
After the twenty-second phase there remain six phases in the final quarter before the coming of complete objectivity and death; after the breaking of strength that accompanies the twenty-second phase, Yeats declares, “I find at this 23rd Phase which is, it is said, the first where there is hatred of the abstract, where the intellect turns upon itself.” Now is the time when things will become entirely concrete in thought (perhaps in less mystical terms, more material—more artificial), as naked force once again becomes primary.

Causes for Similarity

As mentioned above, one of the proposals about the two men is that they come from a common time and therefore have common visions of decline and death, and are really interested in “saving” their Civilizations—if not in actuality, at least intellectually. In her 1984 book *Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars*, Lucy McDiarmid declares, “to be a poet in the interval between the wars was to hear voices of despair... to be a poet at such a time was also to be a voice oneself, expressing pain, condemning evils, suggesting remedies.” McDiarmid is just one of many who propose that what one is dealing with is part of a broader social phenomenon.

The weakness of this argument when applied to Spengler is easy enough to shatter by simply looking at when the author began his work. Spengler was inspired to write *Untergang des Abendlandes* in 1911, with optimism still at its height and the old Edwardian and Wilhelmine *Zeitgeist* still firmly fixed in place. Indeed, Spengler would declare in his autobiography that “my great book, *Untergang des Abendlandes*, was already emotionally conceived in my twentieth year”—i.e. in 1900. To ascribe his pessimism and prophecy of decline and the end of Western Civilization merely to the Great War, then, is impossible in this case.

A far stronger case can be made that Yeats was a man of his time, who wrote at a time when hopelessness and despair permeated English poetry, captured by W.H. Auden when he wrote, “no universalized system – political, religious or metaphysical

---

36 Ibid. 211.
37 the parallel here is the end of the Winter for Spengler, when politics once again become an extension of blood-sport, and violence becomes the chief form of gaining power, marking the rise of the demagogue—the coming of the Caesars foreshadowed by Napoleon (Spengler places the age of the Caesars and this final phase of winter between 2000 and 2200.) It is worth considering that Yeats offers an alternative timeframe for Phase 22, rather than 1875-1927, he suggests that “in some countries and some forms of thought it is from 1815-1927.” Spengler, *Untergang*, 70-71; Yeats, *A Vision* (1925), 209.
- has been bequeathed to us." McDiarmid suggests that this is the impetus that drives Yeats in his *A Vision*, looking to Plotinus for a spiritual foundation that seemed to be lacking. The war left people asking questions; this perhaps had something to do with the incomplete nature of the conflict. Yeats himself wrote several works with apocalyptic overtones before and after *A Vision*, of which "The Second Coming" is just one example. He did feel the hopelessness of the age, and it reflected in his writing.

However, Yeats' own elitist leanings and occult fascinations were already awake as early as the 1890s. His growing aloofness from the nationalist movement reflected a decreasing confidence in its leadership even by 1900, and he was offering critiques of society around him at the same time. The drive of Yeats’ writing is one of disillusionment with the frivolity of the world around him—a sentiment shared by Spengler, who looked on in horror at the fumbling diplomacy of Agadir.

In addition, the ideas expressed in Yeats and Spengler alike reflect a reaction already building in Europe to the industrialization of the continent—a reaction which also gave rise to the calls for social reform from men like Dickens, Marx, and Engels. The Great War certainly left devastation on an unparalleled scale, but signs of decay and collapse had already been pointed out by men interested in a more material understanding of the age. What sets Spengler and Yeats apart from their nineteenth century predecessors in the Romantic movement, the Communist phenomenon, and other solutions to the problems of the day is what Spengler called "strong pessimism." Marx and the Communists called for a reform for betterment, the Romanticists posed solutions that might rescue a collapsing society, just as two examples; Spengler’s and Yeats’ histories have decided that no rescue can be made, that the state of the times must be embraced, because it cannot be denied—they are at once marked by the great influence of Romanticism of the day, and also by the firm rejection of the same.

The central cause for similarity between the two authors and their works seems less rooted in their time than it does in their influences. Foremost of these was the chief critic of his own age, Friedrich Nietzsche. Spengler was first introduced to Nietzsche in his own native language as a schoolboy, devouring Nietzsche in secret during his days at the Franckean Foundation’s *Latina* in Halle. Nietzsche’s words reached a

---

40 McDiarmid, *Civilization*, 1.

41 Despite McDiarmid’s claims that Versailles and Locarno were meant to reconcile, the reality was that the Great War was not finished in 1918, and those who, like Spengler and Yeats, saw a new age of bloodshed beginning, knew this—however vaguely.

42 See footnote 23.

43 Koktanek, *Spengler*, 44, 51. The *Latina* was a sort of private high school aimed at classical education, so Nietzsche and other contemporary writers not only failed to appear in the curriculum but were actively discouraged. Nietzsche was so important to Spengler, though, that when he died he was
more mature mind when Yeats obtained copies of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, The Case of Wagner and A Genealogy of Morals in his late thirties.\textsuperscript{44}

Aside from his critiques of Hegelian history and popular attitudes, Nietzsche is one of the first thinkers to see a society in the midst of collapse and not propose a solution to it; he does not write in the spirit of Feuerbach or Marx or even Dickens in proposing the next step in history, but sees a fatal crack in the social edifice of the nineteenth that cannot be repaired, making replacement of society itself necessary.\textsuperscript{45} He summons up an end to all Western Civilization as he knew it and, in many ways, as we today know it, but willingly recognized as well that the time for this end and this change has not yet come—he calls himself “untimely”.

Spengler and Yeats do something very similar to Nietzsche in regards to their own time. Three specific points in Nietzsche find themselves quite alive in Spengler and Yeats. The first two are reflected in the cyclical nature of history in both Decline and A Vision, the last is the root of the pessimism in both works.\textsuperscript{46} The “eternal recurrence,” found in The Gay Science, of the young Nietzsche, and the “transvaluation of all values,” found in The Antichrist, of an elder Nietzsche, also represent two ideas central to Spengler and Yeats’ view of the cycles of history and the fall of civilization.\textsuperscript{47} Between The Gay Science and The Antichrist there is another—probably Nietzsche’s most important—work, Thus Spoke Zarathustra. In Zarathustra one finds Nietzsche’s Übermensch, a word deprived of a proper English translation since the publishing of the Superman comics in the 1930s. One also finds his antithesis, the “Last Man”—a clear jab at the Hegelian end of history.\textsuperscript{48} It is also buried with a copy of Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Koktanek, Spengler, 462. Spengler would also later in his life be an esteemed member of the Nietzsche Archive and wrote extensively on Nietzsche during his time there, which ended with his resignation after Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche’s endorsement of Hitler.

\textsuperscript{44} Otto Bohlmann, Yeats and Nietzsche (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1982), 1.

\textsuperscript{45} This is most strongly evidenced in Nietzsche’s declaration that “God is dead” — not an affirmation of amoral atheism, but a declaration that the old moral order had ceased to hold sway, and needed to be replaced. The replacement Nietzsche offers, of course, is the Übermensch.

\textsuperscript{46} Though Yeats reaches them through a sort of transcendental mysticism and Spengler relies on worldly dogmatism.


\textsuperscript{48} This Final Man populates the final phase of Spengler’s civilizational model abundantly; the cosmopolitan, hedonistic, capitalist urbanite inherits the earth, where “the Big City sucks up the land insatiably, forever demanding and devouring new currents of men, until, amid an empty and nearly depopulated wasteland, it exhausts itself and dies.” Spengler indeed uses the term “last men” just above this citation. Yeats, the poet and dramatist, focuses on the Übermensch, and indeed incorporates him into his work; R.F. Foster notes in his biography of Yeats that in his collection The Secret Rose, there is an element of the self-made morality of the Übermensch present in “the Children of the Holy Spirit” who “reveal that hidden substance of God which is color and music”—i.e. artists, a group
here that one finds the final concept that permeates, indeed that drives, Spengler’s and Yeats’ works: the *amor fati*.

Permeating both *A Vision* and *Decline* is this joyful embrace of one’s destiny because it is destined. Thus Yeats says in the dedication of his first edition of *A Vision*, “I murmured, as I have countless times, ‘I have been part of it always and there is maybe no escape, forgetting and returning life after life...’ but murmured it without terror, in exultation almost.” This embrace of the eternal recurrence—the act of accepting the eternal return and through accepting it actively willing it—is the beginning of the transvaluation of all values, which itself is the new structure for the new age proposed by Nietzsche. For Yeats the transvaluation of all values might be found in the new cosmology he is creating in *A Vision*.

Likewise, Spengler declares an *amor fati*, writing that “it all hangs on this: that one makes clear and understands this situation, this *destiny*, about which one can lie to oneself, but never avoid. Who does not admit this to himself does not count among the men of his generation.”

The New Historiography

What Yeats and Spengler are both doing is not merely announcing the doom of their civilization, but indeed proposing something novel and unique about it, and giving a new view of it. It was not just the accomplishment of the task, but indeed the very goal that both men set forth to accomplish that emphasizes their significance. Spengler both wanted to pioneer a new kind of history, world-history, and to create a system with which he could predict major world-historical events, thus making history not only in the past but in the present and future—he wanted, in short, to create a total historiography to replace the historiography of before. He boldly opens his second edition of *Untergang* by saying “Here is contained only one aspect of what I see before me, a new outlook solely on history, a philosophy of destiny, and indeed

Nietzsche himself held in high esteem. Where *There is Nothing* further echoes (or perhaps rather expects, since Yeats did not obtain a copy of *Zarathustra* until after the play was written) Zarathustra’s voice crying out in the wilderness in its hero’s own words, “I think that all people I meet are like farmyard creatures, they have forgotten their freedom, their human bodies are a disguise.” Spengler, *Untergang*, 676; Foster, *Yeats*, I, 177, 269, 272; Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche*, 60.  

49 Corollary, perhaps, to the warnings of antiquity against defying the fates. 


51 Spengler, *Untergang*, 62. This is consistent with Nietzschean philosophy, for it is always the Übermensch who directs the flow of history, who truly counts among his Generation, while the last men who cannot embrace their destiny serve only as pawns and placeholders—for Spengler, this represents solely the age of the Caesars, in the Winter stage of the cycle, but he is in agreement with Nietzsche that it represents either the age that the West is about to enter.
the first of its kind."\(^52\)

He is the progenitor of his work, but he is not the end of the task by himself. He writes to open a much broader project of comparing contemporaneous civilizations and seeking the keys to the future in this historical approach. His audience, then, is limited, like Nietzsche (and Yeats). Thus he writes that he provides resources “for the serious reader, who seeks a vision of life rather than a definition, I have, in view of the far-too-condensed form of the text, given a number of works in the footnotes, that this vision can be led over distant vistas of our knowledge.”\(^53\)

To understand him, one must “not allow oneself to be fooled by terms... and as for the others, it matters not.”\(^54\) His sense of bestowing a vision has earned him a title he shares with his predecessor Nietzsche, the “prophet,” who speaks only to the elect.\(^55\) Further, his “philosophy of history”, or, as he would call it in 1922, “philosophy of destiny”, summons his audience to an amor fati in history—in this way, he shares a mystical element with Yeats.

Yeats is exactly like Spengler in his understanding of the significance of his project: “Swedenborg and Blake,” he declares, “preferred to explain [the Gyres] figuratively, and so I am the first to substitute for Biblical and mythological figures, historical movements and actual men and women.”\(^56\) He is, he says, the first to truly undertake an effort to reveal his system rather than hide it behind vague notions and mythical figures. So too, like Spengler’s, is his work incomplete: “I have not even dealt with the whole of my subject, perhaps not even with what is most important.”\(^57\)

Yeats has something of a more personal goal than Spengler, however; he writes “I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of one history, and that the soul’s.”\(^58\) He is writing for himself, but the revelatory aspect of his writing is found in the spiritual experience that he claims brought it about; he does not detail this in the

\(^{52}\) Spengler, Untergang, viii.
\(^{53}\) Spengler, Untergang, ix.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) This is, of course, after the war has been lost, dashing his original hopes against the rocks, but much of the original purpose also remains. This purpose is expressed in his original preface: “Although its business is a general philosophy of history, it is nevertheless in a deeper sense a commentary on the great epoch under whose omens the chief ideas formed themselves.” It would be a great error to think that Spengler is using the apocalyptic language here for mere poetic effect—in 1917, he has already begun to see the end of the Autumn and the beginning of Winter; the “großen Epoche” cannot be understood independently of the philosophy of seasonal epochs he subsequently puts forth. Spengler, Untergang, x.
\(^{56}\) Yeats, A Vision (1925), xi-xii.
\(^{57}\) Yeats, A Vision (1925), xii.
\(^{58}\) Yeats, A Vision (1925), xi.
first version, but does present it at length in the 1937 version. The notion of being in contact with some greater truth was confirmed to him when he saw the shocking similarities between Spengler’s work and his own: “I found that not only were dates that I had been given the same as his but whole metaphors and symbols that had seemed my work alone.... I knew of no common source, no link between him and me, unless through The elemental things that go// About my table to and fro.”

What Spengler and Yeats are undertaking, then, is a prophetic task to present a vision of a new history and a new age, a new system and a new order. For Spengler, it is for an audience who will listen and understand; for Yeats, it is for his close circle and also for himself. Their goals, however, in presenting a system that will help them understand not only history but also mankind as a whole, challenge the historian in the same way: they present a challenge to think not in simple, superficial terms like “nation-state”, “country”, “socio-political unit”, but in the way of great Civilizations which live as organisms, to look at the human species and see broad, complex, and contemporaneous phenomena that drive the course of history. The answers to the questions Spengler and Yeats present offer a new thinking which has great value in solving problems still hovering over our post-war society—problems like those posed by Albert Camus—and might bestow meaning in an age which is still struggling to accept the end of the Victorian Age and the “Downfall of the Occident.”

Bibliography

Fennelly, John F. Twilight of the Evening Lands: Oswald Spengler – A Half Century

59 Yeats, A Vision (1937), 18-19. He neglects that they might both get certain themes from common literature that had influenced each, such as Nietzsche.
Comparative Civilizations Review