Pessimism?

Oswald Spengler

Oswald Spengler, 1880–1936

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My book (The Decline of the West, Vol. I.) has met with widespread misunderstandings. In a sense, that is almost an inevitable concomitant of any novel approach which arrives at new conclusions. Such a reaction is all the more to be expected when the conclusions reached, or even the perspectives and methodology that led to them, present a serious challenge to the prevailing mood of an age. When such a book chances to become fashionable, the misunderstandings will multiply. For then people are confronted suddenly by a complex of ideas which they should actually not have attempted to digest until after years of preparatory reading.

With my own book there is the added difficulty that only the negative side of the picture has hitherto reached the public. Most critics have neglected to observe that this first volume represents only a fragment from which, as I was soon to realize, it is not easy to form conclusions about what is to follow. The forthcoming second volume will round out the “Morphology of World History,” thus bringing to a close my examination of at least one aspect of the problem. Attentive readers will have noticed that I touched briefly on a second aspect, the ethical question, in my essay Prussianism and Socialism.

One further obstacle to an understanding of my book is the rather disconcerting title it bears. I was careful to emphasize that this title was chosen years before publication, and that it objectively describes a simple fact for which evidence can be found in the most familiar events of world history. Still, there are people who cannot hear the word “decline” without thinking of a sudden and dreadful calamity. My title does not imply catastrophe. Perhaps we could eliminate the “pessimism” without altering the real sense of the title if we were to substitute for “decline” the word “fulfillment,” bearing in mind the special functions that Goethe assigned to this concept in his own world view.

However, even the first installment of my book was not addressed to speculative persons, but to active ones. My aim was to present an image of the world to be lived with, rather than to devise a system for professional philosophers to brood over. I was not aware of this distinction at the time, but it will obviously prevent a large number of readers from arriving at a true understanding of what the book is about.

The active person lives in the world of phenomena and with it. He does not require logical proofs, indeed he often cannot understand them. “Physiognomic rhythm” — one of the terms that practically no one has been able to comprehend fully — gives him deeper insights than any method based on logical proof ever could. I made assertions in my book which scholarly readers have regarded as completely contradictory. Yet all these are things that have long been felt and cherished privately, though not necessarily consciously, by individuals who are inclined to a life of action. When such individuals read books, that is to say, when they enter the realm of theory, they reject the same “historical relativism” that is second nature to them when they are engaged in practical activity, or are observing people and situations for the purposes of action.

The contemplative person, on the other hand, is by nature remote from life. He views it from a distance, for it is strange and goes against the grain. As soon as it threatens to become something other than an observed object, he is annoyed. Contemplative persons collect, dissect, and arrange things, not for any practical purpose but simply because it makes them happy. They demand logical proofs and know how to go about getting them. To them, a book such as mine must forever remain an aberration.

For I confess that I have never had anything but contempt for “philosophy for its own sake.” To my way of thinking there is nothing more tedious than pure logic, scientific psychology, general ethics, and esthetics. Life is not made up of science and generalities. Every line that is not written in the service of active living seems to me superfluous. At the risk of being taken too literally, I would say that my way of looking at the world is related to the “systematic” way as the memoirs of a statesman are related to the ideal state of a utopian. The former writes down what he has lived through; the latter records what he has dreamed up.

Now there does exist, particularly in the German tradition, what might be called a statesmanlike way of experiencing the world, an unforced and unsystematic attitude toward life which can be recorded only by means of a kind of metaphysical memoir-writing. It is important to realize that my book belongs in this tradition. If in the following I mention some illustrious names, it is not meant to imply anything about the quality of the book but merely to indicate the type of vision that went into its making.

A powerful stream of German thought runs from Leibniz to Goethe and Hegel, and on into the future. Like all things German, this stream was forced to run underground and to flow on unnoticed through the centuries. For over the same period even the creators of this tradition found that they had to adapt themselves to foreign and superficial patterns of thought.

Leibniz was Goethe’s great teacher, although the latter was never really conscious of it. Goethe often adopted genuinely Leibnizian ideas, either out of a natural affinity for his thought or through the influence of his friend Herder. In such instances, however, he always referred to Spinoza, whose mode of thinking was in fact quite dissimilar. Leibniz’s outstanding characteristic was his constant involvement in the important events of his time. If we were to remove from his works all the items that are concerned with politics, the reunification of the churches, mining projects, and the organization of science and mathematics, not much would be left. Goethe resembles him in that he always thought historically, i.e., with constant reference to the real facts of existence. Like Leibniz, he would never have been capable of constructing an abstract philosophical system.

Hegel was the last great thinker to take political realities as his point of departure without letting his thought be entirely smothered by abstractions. Then came Nietzsche, a dilettante in the best sense, who held firmly aloof from academic philosophy, which by his time had become altogether sterile. He was taken in by Darwin’s theories, yet he transcended the age of English Darwinism. He gave us the vision with which we can now bring about a victory for a vital and practical approach to world history.

These are, as I now see, the premises that unconsciously influenced my writing. Among them there is not a single “system” of generalities. The historical compilations of Leibniz, Goethe’s observations on nature, and Hegel’s lectures on world history were all written in clear view of factual reality — something that cannot be said of Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s works.

I construe the relationships between reality and speculative thought in a manner wholly different from the systematic philosophers. For them reality is lifeless matter from which laws can be derived. For me, reality presents examples that illuminate an experienced thought, a thought which is communicable only in this form.

Because this approach is unscientific, it requires an uncommon facility for thinking in broad outlines and for synthesizing. It normally happens, as I have had occasion to notice, that as the reader concentrates on one point in my book he quickly loses sight of the others. In doing so he misconstrues everything, for the book is so cohesive that to isolate a single detail is tantamount to committing an error. Moreover, one must be able to read between the lines. Many things are merely hinted at, while others cannot be expressed at all in scientific fashion.

The central idea is the concept of Destiny. The reason it is so difficult to make the reader understand it is that the process of systematic, rational thought leads him to its very opposite: the idea of causality. Destiny and Chance are matters quite remote from the apprehension of cause and effect, antecedent and consequent. There is a danger that Destiny may be misunderstood as simply another way of referring to a causal sequence that exists without being readily visible. The scientific mind will never be able to grasp this. The ability to perceive facts of an emotional and vital nature ceases as soon as one begins to think analytically. Destiny is a word whose meaning is felt. Time, Yearning, and Life are closely related concepts. No one can presume to understand the essence of my thought unless he can sense the ultimate meaning of these words as I intended it.

The idea of Destiny leads to a kind of experience that is exceedingly difficult to comprehend. I call it “depth experience.” It is more closely related to rational thought, but only in its end effect, not in its origins. This concept presents us with two of the most difficult problems of all. What is meant by the word “Time”? There is no scientific answer to this question. What is meant by the word “Space”? Here, rational thought may possibly provide us with an answer. Yet a connection exists between Destiny and Time, and also between Space and Causality. What, then, is the relationship between Destiny and Cause? The answer to this is fundamental to the concept of depth experience, but it lies beyond all manners of scientific experience and communication. The fact of depth experience is as indisputable as it is inexplicable.

A third concept, likewise very difficult to grasp, is that of Physiognomic Rhythm. This is actually something which every human being possesses. He lives with it and constantly applies it to practical ends. It is something one is born with and which cannot be acquired. The proverbial naïveté and ludicrousness displayed in public affairs by the old-style abstract scholar is a result of the retarded development of this rhythm. Nevertheless, even this personality type possesses enough of it to go on living.

What I have in mind, however, is a very exalted form of this Rhythm, an unconscious technique of grasping not merely the phenomena of everyday life but the sense of the universe. Few persons can be said to master it. It is the technique that makes a genuine historian the equal of a born statesman, despite the disparity between theory and practice. Of the two principal techniques of gaining knowledge and understanding, it is without doubt the more important by far for history and real life. The other method, systematic thought, serves only to discover truths. But facts are more important than truths. The entire course of political and economic history, indeed of all human endeavors, is dependent on the constant application of this technique by individuals, including the insignificant individuals who are historically passive as well as the great ones who make history.

The physiognomic technique is predominant during most of the waking life of historically active and passive individuals. By comparison, the systematic technique, which is the only one recognized by philosophy, is virtually reduced to historical insignificance. What makes my approach so unorthodox is the fact that it is consciously based on the technique of real life. As a result it is inwardly consistent, though it lacks a system.

The concept that has caused the most serious misunderstandings is the one to which I assigned, not quite fortunately perhaps, the term “relativism.” This has not the slightest thing in common with the relativism of physical science, which is based solely on the mathematical contrast between constant and function. It will take years for readers to become sufficiently familiar with my concept for it to gain real currency. For it is a completely ethical view of the world in which individual lives take their course. To those who have not understood the concept of Destiny, this term will be meaningless. As I see it, Relativism in history is an affirmation of the idea of Destiny. The uniqueness, irrevocability, and nonrecurrence of all events is the form in which Destiny manifests itself to the human eye.

Like the Physiognomic Technique, this Relativism has existed, either in active life or in passive observation, at all times. It is such a natural part of real life, and is in such complete control of everyday occurrences, that it does not reach the consciousness. In fact, when the mind is engaged in theorizing, i.e., when it is forming generalizations, the existence of this Relativism is usually denied emphatically. The idea is not really new as such. In our late age there can be no new ideas. Throughout the entire nineteenth century not one question was raised that had not already been discovered, reflected upon, and brilliantly formulated by the Scholastics.

It is only because Relativism is such an intrinsic element of life, and thus so unphilosophical an idea, that it has not been considered suitable as part of a “system.” The old adage, “One man’s meat is another man’s poison,” is just about the reverse of all academic philosophy. The academic is bent on proving that one man’s meat is every man’s meat, i.e., that the ethical point he has just proved in his book is binding on all. I have quite consciously taken the opposite standpoint, namely that of life, not of thought. The two naïve positions maintain either that something exists that has normative value for all eternity regardless of Time and Destiny, or that such a thing does not exist.

However, what is here called Relativism is neither of these two positions. It is here that I have created something new. It is an experienced fact that “world history” is not a unified sequence of events, but rather a collection of high cultures, of which there have been eight in number up to now. The life histories of these cultures are quite independent of each other, yet each shares a similar structural pattern with all the others. This being established, I demonstrated that every observer, regardless of whether he thinks in terms of life or of thought only, thinks solely as a representative of his own particular time. With this we can dismiss one of the most absurd criticisms leveled against my views: the argument that Relativism carries with it its own refutation.

The conclusion to be drawn is that for every culture, for every epoch within a culture, and for every kind of individual within an epoch there exists an overall perspective that is imposed and exacted by the time in question. This perspective must be considered absolute for that particular time, but not with respect to other times. There is a perspective imposed by our own time, yet it goes without saying that it is different from that of the Age of Goethe. “True” and “false” are concepts that cannot be applied here. The only pertinent descriptive terms are “deep” and “shallow.” Whoever thinks differently is, in any case, incapable of thinking historically.

Any vital approach to the problems of history, including the one I am proposing, belongs to a single time. It evolved out of a previous approach and will in turn evolve into another. There are in all of history just as few totally correct or totally false approaches as there are right and wrong stages in the growth of a plant. All are necessary, and the only sensible thing to say is that a certain stage is successful or unsuccessful with respect to the demands of the moment. The same holds true for every world view, no matter when it arises. Even the most hard-bitten systematic philosopher feels this. He uses such terms as “obsolete,” “typical for the age,” and “premature” to describe the views of others. By so doing he is admitting that the concepts of truth and falsity have meaning only for the outer shell of science, but not for its vital essence.

Thus we arrive at the distinction between facts and truths. A fact is something unique, something which has really existed or will really exist. A truth is something which can exist as a possibility without ever entering reality. Destiny has to do with facts; the relation between cause and effect is a truth. All this has been known since time immemorial. What men have failed to realize, however, is that life, for that very reason, has to do only with facts, that it is made up of facts exclusively, and that its only mode of response is factual. Truths are quantities of thought, and their importance lies solely within the realm of thought. Truths can be found in a doctoral dissertation in philosophy; flunking a doctoral examination is a fact. Reality begins where the realm of thought ends. No one, not even the most ascetic systematician, can overlook this fact of life. And, indeed, he does not overlook it. But he forgets it as soon as he starts thinking about life instead of living it.

If I can lay claim to any accomplishment at all, it is that no one can ever again view the future as an unwritten tablet on which anybody can inscribe whatever pleases his fancy. The capricious and arbitrary outlook that endorses the motto “It shall be thus!” must now give way to a cool and clear vision that sees the possible, and therefore necessary, facts of the future, and that makes its options accordingly. The first thing that confronts man in the form of Destiny is the time and place of his birth. This is an inescapable fact; no amount of thought can comprehend its origin, and no will can avert it. Moreover, it is the most decisive fact of all. Everyone is born into a people, a religion, a class, an age, a culture. It is Destiny that determines whether a man be born a slave in Periclean Athens, a knight at the time of the Crusades, or a laborer’s or rich man’s son in our own day. If anything can be called fate, fortune, or destiny, it is this. History means that life is constantly changing. For the individual, however, life is precisely thus and so, and not otherwise. With his birth the individual receives his nature and a particular range of possible tasks, within which he has the privilege of free choice. Whatever his nature wills or is capable of, whatever his birth allows or prevents, for every individual there is prescribed a definite range of happiness or misery, greatness or cowardice, tragedy or absurdity, which will make up his life only. What is more, Destiny determines whether his life is to have significance for the lives of those around him, that is to say, whether it will be meaningful for history. In the light of this, the most fundamental of facts, all philosophizing about “the” task of “humanity” and “the” nature of “morality” is idle talk.

That is what is truly novel in my approach, an idea that had to be expressed and made accessible to life after the entire nineteenth century had striven toward it: Faustian man’s conscious relation to history. People have not understood why I chose to substitute a new image for the usual pattern (antiquity — Middle Ages — modern times). Man lives constantly “in an image”; it governs his decisions, and shapes his mentality. He can never rid himself of an old image until he has acquired a new one and has made it completely his own.

“Historical vision” — this is possible only for Western European man, and even for him it is possible only from this moment on. Nietzsche could still speak of the historical disease. He used this term to describe what he saw around him: the faint-hearted romanticism of the poets and writers, the philologians’ dreamlike nostalgia for the distant past, the patriots’ habit of timidly consulting previous history before arriving at any decisions, the urge to compare, symptomatic of insufficient mental independence.

Since 1870 we Germans have suffered more from this disease than any other nation. Is it not true that we have continually looked to the ancient Teutons, to the Crusader knights, and Hölderlin’s Greeks whenever we have been at a loss for what to do in the Age of Electricity? The British have been more fortunate. They have preserved all the institutions that sprang up in the wake of the Norman Conquest: their laws, freedoms, and customs. At all times they have been able to sustain an impressive tradition without ever seeing it in jeopardy. They have never felt the need to compensate for a thousand years of shattered ideals by gazing nostalgically into the remote past. The historical disease lingers on in the idealism and humanism of today’s Germany. It is causing us to concoct pretentious plans for improving the world; each day brings some radically new and foolproof scheme for giving all aspects of life their final, correct form. The only practical outcome of all these designs lies in the fact that they are exhausting crucial energies through senseless quarreling, spoiling our chances to discover real opportunities, and failing to give London and Paris any real competition.

Historical vision is the direct opposite of this. Those who have it are experts — confident, cool-headed experts. A thousand years of historical thought and research have spread out before us a vast treasure, not of knowledge, for that is relatively unimportant, but of experience. Once these experiences are viewed in the perspective I have just described, they take on an entirely new meaning. Up to now — this is truer for the Germans than for any other nation — we have looked to the past for models to live by. But there are no models. There are only examples of how the life of individuals, peoples, and cultures have evolved, reached maturity, and become extinct. These examples show us the relationships that exist between inborn character and external conditions, between Tempo and Duration. We are not given patterns to imitate. Rather, we can observe how something happened, and thus learn what consequences to expect from our own situation.

Up to now only a few persons have had such insights, and then only with regard to their immediate pupils, subordinates, or co-workers. Some superior statesmen have had it as well, but only in connection with personalities and nations of their own time. This was the refined art of controlling life’s forces, acquired through the ability to seize its opportunities and predict its changes. With this art one could be master over others or even be Destiny itself. We are now in a position to do likewise for our own culture, predicting its course for centuries ahead as if it were an organism whose inner structure we had studied exhaustively. We realize that every fact is a chance occurrence, unforeseen and unpredictable. Yet with the picture of other cultures before us, we can be just as sure that the nature and course of future life, of individuals as well as of cultures, are not accidental. Future developments can, of course, be brought to perfection, threatened, corrupted, and destroyed by the free choice of active persons. But they can never be diverted from their real direction and meaning.

This has made possible for the first time a truly great form of education. It will require the recognition of inner potentialities. It will mean imposing obligations, not on the basis of “ideal” abstractions, but in agreement with the prediction of future facts. It will necessitate the training of individuals and whole generations for the fulfillment of these obligations. For the first time we are able to see that the entire literature of ideal “truths,” all of those noble, well-meant, and foolhardy schemes, outlines, and brainstorms, all of those books, pamphlets, and speeches are absolutely useless. All other cultures have, at a corresponding stage in their development, labeled these things for what they are and consigned them to oblivion. Their only tangible effect was to have puny scholars write books about them later. Let me repeat: For the mere observer there may be such things as truths; for life there are no truths, only facts.

This leads me to the question of pessimism. When in 1911, under the impression of the events at Agadir, I suddenly discovered my “philosophy,” the European-American world was infused with the trivial optimism of the Darwinist age. With the title of my book, chosen in instinctive opposition to the prevailing mood, I unconsciously put my finger on the aspect of evolution that no one was willing to see. If I had to choose again now, I would try with another formula to strike at today’s equally trivial pessimism. I would be the last person to maintain that history can be appraised by means of a catchword.

Be that as it may, as far as the “goal of humanity” is concerned I am a convinced and thoroughgoing pessimist. As I see it, humanity is a zoological entity. I see no progress, no goal or path for mankind, except perhaps in the minds of Western progress-mongers. In this mere mass of population I can distinguish no such thing as a “spirit,” not to speak of a unity of effort, feeling, or understanding. The only place where I can make out a meaningful advance of life toward a particular goal, a unity of soul, will, and experience, is in the history of single cultures. What we discover there is, to be sure, limited and factual. Yet it shows us a progression from desire to accomplishment, culminating in new tasks that do not take the form of ethical catchwords and generalities but, rather, of tangible historical goals.

Whoever chooses to call this pessimism will reveal thereby his utterly pedestrian idealism. This kind of person sees history as a highway, with mankind plodding along steadily in one direction, forever following some philosophical cliché or other. The philosophers, each in his own way but nonetheless “correctly” in every case, have long since hit upon the sublime and abstract terminology to describe the true goal and essence of our earthly sojourn. Yet optimism consists further in forever striving after these slogans without ever reaching them. A conceivable end to all this striving would spoil the ideal. Whosoever objects to all this is a pessimist.

I would be ashamed to go through life with such tawdry ideals. There is in all of this the diffidence of born dreamers and cowards, people who cannot stand to face reality and formulate a real goal in a few sensible words. They insist on broad generalities that glitter in the distance. This calms the fears of those who are impotent when it comes to anything demanding leadership, enterprise, or initiative. I am aware that a book such as mine can have devastating consequences for these people. Germans have written to me from America that for persons who are determined to be something in life, the book has the effect of a bracing tonic. Still, those born only for dreaming, poetry, and oratory can be contaminated by any book. I know these “fair youths”; the universities and literary coteries are fairly crawling with them. First it was Schopenhauer, and then Nietzsche, who freed them from the obligation to expend energy. Now they have found a new liberator.

No, I am not a pessimist. Pessimism means not to see any more tasks. I see so many unsolved tasks that I fear we shall have neither time nor men enough to go at them. The practical aspects of physics and chemistry have come nowhere near the limits of their possibilities. Technology has yet to reach its peak in nearly all fields. One of the major tasks still facing modern classical philology is to create an image of antiquity that will remove from the minds of our educated populace the “classical” picture, with its invitation to pedestrian idealism.

There is no better place than Classical antiquity to learn how matters really stand in the world, and how romanticism and abstract ideals have been shattered time and again by factual events. Things would be quite different for us if we had spent more time in school on Thucydides and less on Homer. Up to now no statesman has ever thought to write a commentary on Thucydides, Polybius, or Tacitus for our young people. We have neither an economic history of antiquity nor a history of ancient politics. Despite the astonishing parallels to Western European history no one has ever written a political history of China to the reign of Shih Huang Ti. The Law, imposed by the social and economic structure of our civilization, is still in the initial stages of being investigated. According to those most familiar with the field, the science of jurisprudence has yet to reach out beyond philology and dry scholasticism. Political economics is as yet not really a science at all.

I shall refrain from discussing the political, economic, and organizational tasks we face in our own future. What our contemplatives and idealists are seeking is a comfortable Weltanschauung, a philosophical system that requires only that one be convinced by it; they want a moral excuse for their timorousness. These are the born debaters who spend their days in the remote corners of life discussing things. Let them stay there.

We cannot fashion a program for the future millennia of humanity without running the risk of its being thwarted immediately by reality. It is possible, however, to do something of the sort for the next few centuries of Faustian culture, the historical outlines of which are visible. What are the implications of these facts? The Puritan pride of England says, “Everything is predestined. Therefore I must emerge victorious.” The others say, “Everything is predestined. That is prosaic and not at all idealistic. Hence there is no use even trying.” But the truth is that the tasks facing the factual persons among us Westerners are innumerable. For the romantics and ideologists, however, who cannot think of the world without writing poems, painting pictures, devising ethical systems, or living solemn Weltanschauungen, it is quite understandably a hopeless prospect.

I shall come right out and say it — let those who wish cry out in protest: The historical significance of art and abstract thought is seriously overrated. No matter how important their role has been during great eras, there have always been more essential things. In the history of art the importance of Grünewald and Mozart cannot be overestimated. In the real history of the ages of Charles V and Louis XV their existence is of no consequence at all. It may happen that a great historical event stimulates an artist. The reverse has never occurred. What is being produced by way of art today does not even bear significance for art history. And as far as today’s academic philosophy is concerned, none of its various “schools” has the slightest pertinence for life or the soul. Neither our educated citizenry nor scholars in the other disciplines are really paying attention to them. All they are good for is to have dissertations written about them, which will be quoted in later dissertations, none of which will ever be read except by future philosophy professors.

It was Nietzsche who questioned the validity of science. It is high time that we asked the same questions about art. Eras without genuine art and philosophy can still be great eras; the Romans have demonstrated this for us. Yet for those who are always a step behind the times, the arts are synonymous with Life itself.

Not for us, however. People have told me that without art life is not worth living. I ask in return: For whom is it not worth living? I should not care to have lived as a sculptor, ethical philosopher, or dramatist in the days of Marius and Caesar. Nor would I care to have been a member of some Stefan George Circle, attacking Roman politics from behind the Forum with the grand pose of the littérateur.

No one can have a closer affinity for the great art of our past — for there is none today — than I. I should not care to live without Goethe, Shakespeare, or the great monuments of older architecture. I am thrilled by any sublime Renaissance masterpiece, precisely because I am aware of its limitations. I love Bach and Mozart more than I can say; but this cannot make me speak of all the thousands of writers, painters, and philosophers that populate our cities as true artists and thinkers.

There is more painting, writing, and “outlining” going on in Germany today than in all the other countries put together. Is this culture? Or is it a deficiency of our sense of reality? Are we so rich in creative talent, or are we lacking in practical energy? And do the results justify in any way at all the noisy self-advertisement?

Expressionism, yesterday’s vogue, produced not a single personality or artistic work of any note. As soon as I began to question the sincerity of that movement I was shouted down by a thousand voices. Painters, musicians, and poets tried to prove me wrong, but with words, not with deeds. I shall stand corrected when they come forth with the equivalent of Tristan, the Hammerklavier Sonata, King Lear, or the paintings of Marées.

It is a great mistake to consider these flaccid, effeminate, superfluous “movements” as the necessary phenomena of our age. I call this the artsy-craftsy approach. Architecture, painting, poetry, religion, politics, even philosophy itself are treated as handicrafts, techniques that can be taught and learned within the four walls of the studio. This is the argument that emanates from all of our “circles” and brotherhoods, cafés and lecture halls, exhibits, journals, and publishing houses — and it reeks to high heaven. It not only wants to be tolerated, it wants full sway. It calls itself German. It purports to claim the future.

Even in this area I see tasks ahead for us, yet I look in vain for the men (men!) to perform them. One of the tasks for our century is the German novel. Up to now we have had only Goethe. The art of the novel requires outstanding personalities, superior in vigor and breadth of vision, reared in cultural excellence, high-minded but tactful in their views. As yet there is no German prose to match the English and the French. What we have is the individual style of single writers, isolated examples of personal mastery against a background of very poor average performance. The novel could bring about this improvement. Nowadays, however, practical men such as industrialists and army officers are using better, sounder, clearer, more profound language than the tenth-rate scribblers who think style is a sport.

Here in the land of Till Eulenspiegel we have yet to produce a comedy in the grand manner, sublime and profound, clever, tragic, light and refined. It is now almost the only remaining form in which a writer can be poet and philosopher at once, and without pretense. Like Nietzsche a while ago, I still feel the need for a German Carmen, full of spice and wit, sparkling with melody and rhythm, a work to stand in the proud tradition of Mozart, Johann Strauss, Bruckner, and the young Schumann. But the orchestral acrobats of today are incompetents. Since Wagner’s death not one great creator of melody has appeared on the scene.

There was a time when art was a vital enterprise, when life’s rhythm took hold of artists, their works, and their public to such an extent that profundity of thought, rather than formal exactitude, was the true criterion of artistic greatness. Instead of this vital rhythm, we have today what is called the “creative outline” — the most despicable thing imaginable. Everything that lacks life is getting “outlined.” They are “outlining” a private culture with theosophy and the leader-cult; they are “outlining” a private religion with editions of Buddha on hand-made paper; they are “outlining” a State in the spirit of Eros. Since the Revolution there have been “outlines” for agriculture, commerce, and industry.

These ideals should be dashed to pieces; the louder the noise, the better. 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. And we must never lose sight of what lies behind and ahead of us citizens of this century. We Germans will never again produce a Goethe, but indeed a Caesar.

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