

Inventing the Greeks: On the Function of Classical Antiquity in Spengler's *The Decline of the West*

1. Introduction

In *The Decline of the West* Spengler argues that world-history consists of the rise and fall of culture-organisms which, in the course of their existence, pass inexorably through the same developmental stages. From his model of the lifecycles of cultures Spengler claims that the end of western culture is imminent. Although Spengler identifies between 8 and 9 different cultures, his analysis of world-history in *The Decline* only really discusses Graeco-Roman culture. Classical Antiquity, particularly Greek thought, plays a central role in Spengler's philosophical analysis, operating as both an exemplar of a living culture and a cautionary tale of civilizational decline.

Spengler's focus on the Greeks is rendered problematic by his cultural isolation theory, which holds that each culture is opaque to the members of any other culture and thus no meaningful transmission of information can occur between them. Spengler's cyclical model of world-history is founded, by his own account, on the comparative analysis of cultures. And yet, if the cultural isolation theory is true, then his analysis of Greek culture is impossible, as is his use of this analysis to predict the fate of western culture. On these grounds, Spengler's historical model is often dismissed as self-contradictory.

I suggest an alternative reading of Spengler's philosophy. Rather than being a positivist project to uncover the laws of world-history, I argue that Spengler's aim in *The Decline* was to construct a deliberate historical fiction that would compel his contemporaries to address the problems of their own age. Spengler's account of the Greeks is likewise fictional, and serves as an imaginary counterpole to western technological civilisation. The centrality of the Greeks in *The Decline* is not because Spengler believes that we can learn from the Greeks, but because he wishes to demonstrate the impossibility of learning from the Greeks.

To this end this paper will consider the function of Spengler's use of Graeco-Roman culture as a point of comparison with Western culture, particularly in relation to the comparative paradox. This paradox arises from Spengler's use of comparative cultural analysis to demonstrate the impossibility of comparative cultural analysis. This paper will explore the ways in which this problematises the standard interpretation of his philosophy as arguing for the existence of laws of historical change and as offering the method for establishing them. If, as I argue, Spengler holds that comparative cultural analysis is an absolute impossibility, it raises the question of what function the extensive engagement with the history of Apollinian culture serves in his narrative? I argue that the answer lies in Spengler's philosophical method which proceeds through the construction of conceptual counterpoles, fictional constructs that are intended to bring a pre-existing concept, or pole, into sharper relief through contrast. Understood in accordance with Spengler's method of philosophical analysis, the function of Graeco-Roman culture in *The Decline* is to serve as a counterpole to Faustian culture. In other words, it is intended to inform the reader about Western culture, rather than about Graeco-Roman culture. Once understood as a fictional counterpole, I argue, Spengler's extended comparative analysis of Graeco-Roman and Western culture can be seen as serving his primary philosophical project, namely the existential renewal of Weimar Germany. I conclude by suggesting that Spengler's strategic use of history in *The Decline* has a conceptual precursor in Nietzsche's philosophy of history.

2. The Comparative Paradox

Although it promises to explore the rise and fall of eight discrete cultures, *The Decline of the West* famously restricts its attention to three cultures in particular: the Apollinian (Graeco-Roman), the Faustian (Western) and the Magian (Semitic-Hellenistic-Persian). And of these three, it is the Faustian and Apollinian to which Spengler gives most consideration. It is largely through comparison of these two cultures that Spengler lays out the key features of his philosophy of history: cultural cycles, predictive laws of history, cultural isolation, and so on.

The rather obvious problem with Spengler's use of Graeco-Roman culture to articulate and substantiate his philosophy of history is that it is

self-contradictory. Spengler argues that the appropriate method for the analysis of world-history is comparative analysis, or as he terms it, comparative morphology. Through the comparative analysis of the symbolic structures of different culture-organisms, Spengler identifies symmetries in the development and decline of world-cultures. These symmetries establish that 'the inner evolution of these cultures is essentially parallel and corresponds exactly to the evolutionary stages of a living being.'⁶ In effect, it is through his analysis of these symmetries that Spengler justifies his cyclical model of world-history and his conception of cultures as living organisms. And yet it is also through the comparative analysis of the symbolic structures of different culture-organisms that Spengler justifies his cultural isolation theory, that members of one culture can never meaningfully grasp the cultural content of a culture other than their own. The numerous points of comparison that Spengler picks out in the organic structures of Graeco-Roman and Faustian culture also serve to emphasise the radical alterity of non-Faustian Ur-symbols and their attendant cultural symbolics.

And so the reader finds themselves in a situation in which Spengler exhorts them to engage in comparative analysis in support of his cyclical philosophy of history, and then denies the very possibility of comparative analysis, using comparative analysis to support his point. On this comparative paradox hinges the divergence of Spengler commentators into either positivist or relativist camps. Positivist interpretations of Spengler's work lean into the comparative analysis aspect of his work, and along with it the idea of laws of history, symmetrical regularities in cultural development, and the possibility of predicting the future course of Western culture. The cultural isolation theory is then downplayed in importance. A relativist interpretation, on the other hand, takes Spengler's cultural isolation theory and his arguments about the impossibility of the comparative analysis of cultures seriously, and in turn views Spengler's talk of culture-organisms and laws of history as poetic flourishes rather than serious philosophical positions.⁷ If one supports a relativist interpretation of Spengler's philosophy, and his injunction that one can never move beyond one's current symbolic structures to grasp the meaning of the symbolic structures of a different culture, then one faces the problem of explaining away all Spengler's comparative analyses. More specifically, one has to explain the continuous presence of Spengler's Greeks. Because if Spengler was merely being

⁶ Engels (2019), 9.

⁷ See Swer (2018).

poetical in his discussion of the symbolic structures of Apollinian culture, then there is an awful lot of poetry in *The Decline of the West*.

Northrop Frye, it is true, did once float the possibility of reading *The Decline* as simply the expression of an artistic vision, saying that:

[...] what Spengler has produced is a vision of history which is very close to being a work of literature [...]. If *The Decline of the West* were nothing else, it would still be one of the world's great Romantic poems.

However, he then notes that:

There are limits to this, of course: Spengler had no intention of producing a work of *pure* imagination, nor did he do so.⁸

And so if, as the relativist interpretation claims, Spengler's comparative cultural analysis is not what it appears to be, namely comparative cultural analysis, then one is entitled to ask what it in fact *is*? In other words, what work is Spengler's detailed analysis of Apollinian culture, and comparison of Apollinian and Faustian cultures, doing within his philosophical project?

3. Cultural Isolation Theory

The answer to that question, on a relativist interpretation, is that whatever work it is doing, it most definitely isn't comparative cultural analysis. Spengler's cultural isolation theory rests upon his quasi-Kantian perspective on the structures of human consciousness. For Spengler, as for Kant, human perceptual consciousness is governed by the two forms of intuition, those of time and space. Spengler, by contrast, locates these forms of intuition in the peculiarities of each culture-organism. Members of different culture-organisms will have a different form of intuition of space, or Ur-symbol as Spengler calls them, and of time. These forms cannot be derived from experience, and thus can be neither verified nor falsified, but instead operate as *a priori* conditions for the possibility of experiential knowledge. They determine meaning within a culture-world and cannot themselves be questioned regarding their meaning or proximity

⁸ Frye (1974), 6.

to actuality. The forms are necessary, in that any member of a given culture would be unable to have a sensible world at all without them, and are also historically contingent, in that they vary from culture to culture.⁹

The importance of Spengler's cultural *a priori* for his philosophy of history is twofold. Firstly, one can never perceive anything outside of a cultural *a priori*. Secondly, one can never perceive anything outside of one's own cultural *a priori*. Meaning and truth are thus necessarily relative to one's own cultural symbolics. Consequently one could never speak of a universal truth, i.e. one that applied to all members of all cultures, only truths that held with universal force for all members of a specific culture. A further consequence of this is that one could never understand how the world appears to someone who is a member of a different culture.

It is important to note that Spengler's position here is unconditional. And that those who have characterised his view of a culture as a 'windowless monad', or 'a self-contained or closed system', incapable of influencing or being influenced in any significant (i.e. symbolic) way by another, were not exaggerating.¹⁰ Spengler's cultural isolation theory is, in effect, a theory of inter-cultural incommensurability, which holds that the norms of perception and evaluation alter so fundamentally from one culture to another that there is no common ground upon which to either communicate or compare. And it is on the basis of this incommensurability that Spengler can dismiss the numerous assumptions of the 'mechanistic' historiography that he detested. Namely the idea of cumulative, linear historical development culminating in current Western culture; a narrative of progressive development that implies that current Western culture has a far greater grasp of 'the truth' (in science, art, politics, ethics, etc.) than previous cultures. And also the idea that there are (or ever could be) ahistorical, transcultural standards for the meaningful comparison of different cultures.

The uncompromising nature of Spengler's position here has drawn frequent criticism from commentators. For instance, Frye deemed it 'profoundly unacceptable' and that it amounted to 'cultural solipsism', and Collingwood simply called it 'bad philosophy'.¹¹ And Collingwood rather helpfully puts his finger on the nub of the issue: to claim that one can never understand the thought of a member of another culture is one thing, but

⁹ Swer (2023a).

¹⁰ Frye (1974), 12; Collingwood (1927), 318.

¹¹ Frye (1974), 12; Collingwood (1927), 322.

to demonstrate this point by reconstructing the inner life of the Ancient Greek in granular detail and then pointing to it as impossibly unknowable, is quite another. Spengler appears to be guilty of doing what he says cannot be done in order to prove that it cannot be done. Thereby proving that it can be done after all.

If one reads Spengler as Collingwood does here then it is obvious that Spengler has violated his own standards. And, if this were the case, then Spengler really would have engaged in 'bad philosophy'. There is, however, an alternative explanation provided by Spengler himself. Spengler is aware that there are numerous instances in the historical record in which it seems apparent that inter-cultural transfers of knowledge took place between Faustian and non-Faustian cultures, such as Euclidian geometry or Aristarchian heliocentric theory. And he is also aware that if his cultural isolation theory is to be preserved then it must account for this *prima facie* violation of inter-cultural incommensurability.

Spengler states, and this point is repeated throughout *The Decline*, that 'What one people takes over from another – in »conversion« or in admiring imitation – is a name, dress and mask for its own feeling, never the feeling of that other.'¹² In other words, when one encounters an instance of apparent inter-cultural transfer, all one is really encountering is an instance of cultural ventriloquism. For Spengler, everything that takes place in a culture is an expression of that culture's symbolic structure. And it has meaning only within that culture's symbolic structure. Detached from the living culture that gave rise to it, a cultural artefact (be it material or ideational) is an empty signifier, devoid of meaning and capable of bearing a multitude of possible meanings. Consequently, when one encounters the product of another culture operating within Faustian culture all one is really witnessing is a signifier that has absorbed the meaning that Faustian culture has projected onto it. One might think that one has penetrated another culture so deeply that one grasps its Ur-symbol and hears its voice, but in actuality all one is really hearing is Faustian culture throwing its voice.

From this it follows that all the sections in *The Decline* where Spengler appears to penetrate the symbolic structures of cultures other than his own are in fact fabrications, elaborate acts of Faustian cultural ventriloquism. It seems to me to be highly improbable that Spengler would violate his own philosophical rules so frequently without noticing that he

¹² Spengler (1926), 401.

had done so. And thus that it is equally unlikely that he thought that his accounts of Apollinian culture (and others) 'from the inside' were in fact accurate reports of the meaning-structures of that culture. The implication of this is that Spengler knowingly populated a text with numerous analyses of non-Faustian cultures that he himself knew to be fictitious. And furthermore then engaged in extended comparative analysis between fictional culture-constructs and his own Faustian culture. On the face of it this interpretation, I grant, does sound rather absurd. However there are good reasons to believe that this is in fact exactly what Spengler intended to do.

4. Polar Fictions

Investigations into Spengler's methodology tend to revolve, naturally enough, around his comparative morphology. Spengler's morphology however is an aspect of his meta-history which is itself grounded in his philosophical anthropology.¹³ Spengler's broader philosophical method, at this stage in his philosophical development, is rooted in his understanding of the structures of human consciousness. On Spengler's account human consciousness, faced with the mass of experiential information it encounters through its senses, constructs a world by organising its experiences around two poles. Through this 'tension of contraries, the most fundamental of which are the proper (das Eigene) and the alien (das Fremde), humanity differentiates and orders its sensory environment'.¹⁴ This initial division creates the pole and anti-pole of within and without in experiential consciousness, and from this initial division further divisions follow. For Spengler this process is operative in human consciousness not only in the formation of its phenomenal world, but in all operations of consciousness, including enquiry and analysis. Spengler states that:

Just as any sense-impression is only remarked when it detaches itself from another, so any kind of understanding that is genuine critical activity is only made possible through the setting-up of a new concept as anti-pole to one already present, or through the divorce (if we may call it so) of a pair of

¹³ See Swer (2020).

¹⁴ Spengler (1926), 54.

inwardly-polar concepts which as long as they are mere constituents, possess no actuality.¹⁵

It is important to note that the conceptual division effected in perceptual consciousness through this process is subjective and does not reflect an actual division in objective, non-perceptual reality, whatever such a thing might be. In other words, the polar dualities that structure our experiences do not track external reality. They are artificial divisions applied to something that at a fundamental level was originally experienced as a unity.¹⁶

Spengler applies this mode of analysis consistently throughout *The Decline*, creating counter-concepts (what Spengler refers to as anti-poles or alter-egos) to the concepts that he wishes to examine, such nature and history, becoming and become, soul and world, culture and civilisation. The purpose of the counter-concept is not to describe something objectively real but to serve as a foil to the concept by throwing its features into sharper relief through means of contrast. This mode of analysis, that of conceptual clarification through contrast, is entirely in accordance with his theory of cultural isolation and inter-cultural incommensurability. For the concept and its counterpart are both ultimately one, both products of a perceptual consciousness operating within the symbolic framework of a specific cultural *a priori*. The anti-pole may appear as alien in comparison to the familiar concept under analysis, but the 'alienation' is performative rather than actual. For the pole and anti-pole are both just expressions of a culture's Ur-symbol.

Consider, for instance, Spengler's account of the Renaissance. The Renaissance, as a period in which Western culture rediscovered and revived the ideas of Classical antiquity, appears to represent a decisive refutation of Spengler's insistence upon the impossibility of inter-cultural transmissions. Spengler however argues that the Renaissance was not, except in the most superficial sense, a revivification of Apollinian thought. He states that:

we are no more capable of converting a man to a morale alien to his being than the Renaissance was capable of reviving the Classical or of making anything but a Southernised Gothic, an anti-Gothic (my emphasis), out of Apollinian motives.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid. 127.

¹⁶ Swer (2021), 202-209.

¹⁷ Spengler (1926), 345-346.

Those involved in the Renaissance may have imagined that they were uncovering the thought and worldview of Classical Antiquity, and gaining a true understanding of the symbolics of that culture-organism. However, for Spengler, all they were really doing was constructing an ersatz Apollinian culture, one that told them very little about the Graeco-Roman philosophy of life but which spoke volumes about their own Faustian culture. And so it goes with all attempts to penetrate the worldview of an alien culture. All one ever encounters is the reflection of one's own culture but seen through a glass, darkly.

The impossibility of all attempts to grasp the symbolic structure of a different culture applies, by extension, to all attempts to compare it with our own, including Spengler's. Spengler's accounts of the worldviews of non-Faustian cultures can be seen for what they are, alter egos to his own Faustian culture. Both his accounts of Apollinian culture, and those of the Renaissance humanists, are conceptual counter-poles. The key difference between the two accounts lies in the fact that while the Renaissance humanists were unaware that when they beheld their 'anti-Gothic' Classical Antiquity they actually beheld themselves, Spengler was fully cognisant of the fact that his accounts of non-Faustian cultures were all really just expressions of his own culture.

The fact that European culture of the 18th and 19th century lay under the spell of Classical Antiquity is a matter of record. So too is the strong strain of Philhellenism in German cultural life of that period. Spengler found himself, in *The Decline*, writing for a people that felt themselves to be close to Graeco-Roman culture, far closer perhaps than to their own culture. And Spengler, I suggest, worked with what he had at hand. As Bertonneau puts it

Spengler believed... that a peculiarity of the West was that it took interest in the other Great Cultures and studied them, not least Greco-Roman civilization, whose achievements it admired. This admiration, because spuriously motivated, never meant that the West understood the Classical world as the Classical world had understood itself. On the contrary, Spengler argues, the West's notion that it can see through Classical eyes, or that it is the successor of the Classical world, is largely a delusion.¹⁸

¹⁸ Bertonneau (2018), 7.

Spengler's detailed reconstructions of Apollinian culture are self-conscious fabrications painstakingly crafted from the wealth of historical data generated by his own culture's obsession with the Graeco-Roman. They are deliberate anti-poles, mirror-images of the Faustian. And, for Spengler, the function of the anti-pole is not to help us understand the anti-pole, but rather to help us understand the pole. In other words, the purpose of Spengler's Apollinian cultural fables is not to help his fellow Faustians to better understand the Greeks but rather to help them to better understand the Faustians.

6. The Decline as an Existential Project

The bulk of *The Decline* is taken up with the history of different cultures, most of them long defunct. And yet, though it may seem counterintuitive, the focus of *The Decline* throughout is not upon antiquity but upon the present and immediate future of Faustian culture. And the purpose of this focus is to compel the Faustian reader to confront the question of their own existence.

Spengler views the contemporary Faustian as a victim of their own success. The successive refinement of its science and techniques have handed it an unprecedented capacity for extensive power. And at the same time the dominance of the world-as-nature, the mechanistic worldview underlying these fields, has succeeded in alienating the Faustians from their own cultural symbolics. The era of Faustian civilisation is one of Weberian disenchantment, one in which life is atomised, predictable, intellectualised and utterly devoid of transcendent values such as might form a community. Spengler's solution to Faustian civilisational *anomie* is through existential shock treatment. He confronts the reader incessantly with the absolute certainty of their own mortality, both cultural and individual, and denies them the vicarious comfort of a posthumous cultural legacy. The Faustian West, Spengler warns, will not play Athens to some successor culture. Faustian culture will perish without heirs. Spengler's invocation of imminent death is intended to prepare contemporary Western humanity for its ultimate existential confrontation with the meaningless contingency of existence and the necessity to choose whether to affirm Life or accept cultural extinction.

Spengler's existential philosophy has three main components. The first is a type of philosophical anthropology, a historical reconstruction of the

development of the structures of consciousness, the origins of culture, and the ways in which culture mediates human experience of the world and human understanding of itself. This leads to the second component, an account of the structures of experiential consciousness and their relations with the concrete actuality of contemporary Western culture, in particular the role of language, temporality and *a priori* forms of intuition. From this Spengler puts forward a more existential analysis of contemporary civilisation, in which he argues that given the structures of its culture and consciousness, and the advanced technological stage of Faustian culture, Western humanity faces a dwindling number of existential options. He argues that Western civilisation must choose from among these in light of the awareness of the imminent termination of their cultural existence.

Humanity, for Spengler, is witness to the creative flux of 'Becoming; and constructs a world of phenomena bounded by death, underpinned by the two prime feelings of dread and longing and structured by the two forms of intuition of Destiny (Time) and Direction (Space). Human existence, for Spengler, is future-directed and open in the sense that there is a certain degree of freedom in the ways in which humanity can actualise its existential possibilities. However, for Spengler, human existence is a movement along a path at either end of which lies a confrontation with death and the inevitability of its own existential negation. Human consciousness within a culture-world begins, according to Spengler, with an existential confrontation with the danger of non-existence. It is this confrontation that leads to the development of the structures of consciousness, the formation of the Ur-symbol, and the creation of a historical culture.¹⁹ It is what gives a culture its symbolic trajectory. And at the end of a culture's lifecycle, Spengler argues, the inhabitants of an ailing culture once again face an existential confrontation with the inevitability of their own cultural extinction and must make one last decision regarding which remaining existential possibilities to actualise. One may face the awareness of impending culture-death with resolve and honesty, Spengler suggests, or with frivolous self-deception and inactivity. However, for Spengler, even the latter option represents an existential choice.

Freedom is described by Spengler as the 'freedom to do, not this or that, but the necessary or nothing.'²⁰ And the essence of Spengler's conception of existential freedom is the freedom to choose to actualize one's existen-

¹⁹ Swer (2020), 77–81.

²⁰ Spengler (1926), 39.

tial possibilities from the range of available options in the face of the certainty of one's death. As Spengler puts it, 'Life is the process of *affecting possibilities* [my emphasis], and for the brain-man there are *only extensive possibilities*.'²¹

Existential freedom always lies in choosing one's possibilities from within a range of historically limited options. For Spengler one of the dangers of history is that it lures humanity away from an honest assessment of the possibilities of the present with the siren song of past, and thereby defunct, existential possibilities. He writes:

The first thing that man confronts as inescapable destiny, and that which no thought can grasp and no will alter, is the time and place of his birth: everyone is born into a people, a religion, a position, a time, a culture. Yet with that everything is already decided. Destiny has not let a man be born as a slave in the time of Pericles, or as a knight at the time of the Crusades, but in a working-class home or a villa of the present. If there is some fortune, providence, fate, it is this. History means that Life is ever changing. However for the individual *it is thus and not otherwise* [my emphasis].²²

The intimation of personal mortality serves to heighten the need for authentic resolve in determining from among present possibilities the course of action that one wishes to project into the future and make actual. It is for this reason that Spengler condemns the short-term present-centred thought of Faustian civilisation. By imagining the future to be an eternal present the inhabitant of Faustian civilisation is heedless of the future and treats the past as a source of commodities to be mined and recycled. Spengler raises the spectre of imminent cultural death to awaken the inauthentic Faustian to the existential responsibility for the meaning of their own existence. Such an authentic decision involves taking stock of their present (technological) opportunities and choosing to take care of the future. To be Faustian then, for Spengler, is to be essentially temporal, to be perpetually suspended between a past that is already fixed, a present made of circumstances one did not choose, and a future for which one is responsible.

No individual can escape their own fatality and must construct their own existential project in the concrete circumstances into which they are born. Spengler's historical scepticism is intended to awaken civilizational

²¹ Ibid. 37.

²² Spengler (1937), 70.

humanity to the fact that the past is dead and that they must acknowledge the state of the world in which they are at present. One cannot wish oneself into a different time or place. He states that

He who does not understand that this outcome is obligatory and insusceptible of modification, that our choice is between willing *this* and willing nothing at all, between cleaving to *this* destiny or despairing of the future and of life itself; he who cannot feel that there is grandeur also in the realisations of powerful intelligences, in the energy and discipline of metal-hard natures, in battles fought with the coldest and most abstract means; he who is obsessed with the idealism of a provincial and would pursue the ways of life of past ages – must forgo all desire to comprehend history, to live through history or to make history.²³

Spengler's philosophy of history can, I propose, no longer be viewed as the purpose of his philosophical writing. Rather it should be reconsidered as the application of Spengler's existential philosophy to the subject of history.

7. Killing History

The purpose of *The Decline of the West* is to overcome the alienation of the denizen of Faustian civilisation from their own culture. Herf notes that for Spengler:

Conceptual understanding measures, divides, and thus 'kills' the object it comprehends, whereas intuition fills the perceived object with soul and feeling.²⁴

The purpose of Spengler's physiognomic morphology and the continuous comparative cultural analysis was not to teach Faustians the correct method required to gain a genuine understanding of alien cultures. Its sole purpose, I argue, was to teach Faustians the correct method for understanding their own. Spengler's physiognomic morphology is a conceptual dance between counter-concepts designed to revivify and re-enchant Faustian culture. The incorrect method for understanding Faustian culture is the attempt

²³ Spengler (1936), 38.

²⁴ Herf (1984), 53.

to 'cognise' it by engaging with it in the causal, atomising, mechanistic fashion that Spengler views as being typical of the civilisational stage of a culture's development. Instead, Spengler shows us how to intuit it as a living, fecund being.

Spengler's revivification process begins with the data of history, the empirical remnants of bygone cultures, and transforms them into symbols. In this process they change from being brute 'facts, things-become, to truths, emblems of cultural forms of life.'²⁵ And from these 'truths' Spengler fabricates the worldview, the lived experience of the past culture in which these 'truths' formed symbolic structures of meaning. And from this God's eye view of a culture's form of life, Spengler's account travels up and down this interpretative chain, from ethos to symbol to fact, incorporating ever more historical data into an 'experiential' narrative.

Although the historical narratives that Spengler generates in this process of hermeneutic wizardry are self-consciously fictional, the process itself is of real-world importance. Spengler's revivification process can only create historical fictions of the spiritual existence of *other* cultures, given that members of different cultures can never penetrate the symbolic structure of another. However, in *The Decline* each one of these culture-fictions, and its attendant comparative analysis with Faustian culture, serves a practical function. For this process of 're-signification' is one that he wishes us to apply to our own Faustian culture. By viewing the objects of our own, present-centred existence not as dead and disconnected facts, but as symbols with a genealogy that can be retraced and relived, Spengler educates the reader in the means necessary for the discovery of the formative ethos of their own culture.

Spengler uses the tales of other cultures that he devises to try and make us imagine what it would be like to experience the world differently. And by doing so he enables us to take up a perspective on our own experience of the world, to look in our culture for the structures that Spengler 'finds' in other cultures, the feeling of care, the Ur-symbol, the life-stages, and to appreciate the unique character (in the sense of an overall narrative consistency) of our own alienated existence by casting it into relief through contrasting culture-concepts. These structures, which Spengler used in his culture-fictions to stress the alterity of other cultures, are the very features of our own culture that he wants us to recognise, from this critical distance, as our own.²⁶

²⁵ Spengler (1926), 154.

²⁶ Swer (2013b).

In addition to teaching Faustians the correct method for understanding their own culture's symbolic imperative, Spengler's historical fictions were also intended to serve another purpose. Namely, that of irrevocably distancing the contemporary Faustian from their past, both in the sense of the history of their own culture and the history of other cultures, particularly the Apollinian. All of Spengler's constructions of non-Faustian cultures, no matter how sympathetic they may appear, are all engineered to ultimately produce the same effect, namely a sense of shock in the face of the unfathomable otherness of different cultures. Each imaginative narrative of Graeco-Roman existence as it would have appeared to a member of Apollinian culture ends with a reiteration of Spengler's object lesson in historiography, that:

[...] it is quite impossible for us to penetrate completely a historical world-aspect of 'becoming' formed by a soul that is quite differently constituted from our own.²⁷

Paradoxically, the function of Spengler's detailed analyses of Classical Antiquity, and other cultures, is to close them off to his Faustian contemporaries.

Hayden White captures this point succinctly. *The Decline*, he states:

[...] was intended to reveal the fundamental differences between civilisational forms, rather than the similarities which made them instances of generic forms of civilisation (an assertion often overlooked by those who have classified Spengler as a Positivist historian in the same tradition as Toynbee) ... he sought to show how we are isolated within our peculiar modalities of experience, so much so that we could not hope to find analogies and models for the solutions of the problems facing us, and thereby to enlighten us to the peculiar elements in our own present situation.²⁸

Spengler's primary purpose is to compel his compatriots in the Faustian present to make an existential decision, and thereby to determine the course of their civilisation in the immediate future. An authentic existential decision requires a clear-eyed perspective on the concrete possibilities available in the present, and the will to select one such possibility and see

²⁷ Spengler (1926), 131.

²⁸ White (1986), 257.

it actualised. And for such a decision to be made, on Spengler's account, one needs a grasp of the past *only insofar* as it allows you to intuit the cultural imperative of the Faustian Ur-symbol. This culture-specific historical intuition shows one the broad lineaments that any future cultural developments must follow, in addition to providing a record of symbolic expressions that have been exhausted (such as art and poetry) and thus no longer provide viable possibilities for future action. In order to determine the concrete possibilities in the present what is needed is not history but a frank stock-taking of those forms of life that still hold cultural potential. The priority then is not the past but the resources of the present with a perpetual eye on the near future.

As White puts it, Spengler 'taught that history was valuable only insofar as it destroyed, rather than established, responsibility towards the past'.²⁹ If world-history is the history of great cultures, and we can know nothing significant of the worldview of those cultures, then we have nothing to learn from that history except the inevitability of cultural death. Being dead they are not (or rather should not) be part of our assessment of present possibilities, and being radically alien they can offer the Faustian neither model nor guidance. For Spengler, despite his conservative political affiliations and frequent depiction as a reactionary, the pull of the past on the consciousness of the present is nearly always regressive. His focus on history in *The Decline* was intended to outline the structures of Faustian existence, and to confront Faustian humanity with the reality of decline and the death of the symbolic. Spengler's use of history is present-centred. His critique of late Faustian modernity was not intended to provoke despair or fatalism, but to facilitate the sloughing off of dead historical forms of life. In other words, Spengler's history was intended to free Faustian civilisation of the burden of the past. In effect, Spengler uses history to persuade Faustian civilisation to abandon history as a source of transcendental meaning for their existence, and to embrace the present possibilities to be found in their concrete circumstances. And for Faustian humanity, on Spengler's account, the future is technology.

²⁹ Ibid. 37.

8. Nietzsche and Spengler on the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life

At this point in our analysis of Spengler's philosophy of history, understood as the expression of his existential critique of Faustian culture, it is interesting to note how similar it now appears to certain aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy. I concede that attributing a significant part of Spengler's philosophical outlook to Nietzsche's influence is not remotely novel and that reference to it is standard practice in practically all treatments of Spengler in the secondary literature. Spengler himself acknowledges Nietzsche as one of the two thinkers that he was prepared to concede had influenced his own thought.³⁰ However standard analyses of Spengler's Nietzschean influences tend to point to the specific influences that Spengler declares in *The Decline*. Spengler states that

His [Nietzsche's] conceptions of decadence, militarism, the transvaluation of all values, the will to power, lie deep in the essence of Western civilization and are for the analysis of that civilization of decisive importance.³¹

It is even possible to find in Spengler's cultural cycles a faint echo of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, although some have disputed this point.³² I, however, would like to suggest the possibility of influence by, or at least significant commonalities with, an aspect of Nietzsche's work not normally considered in association with Spengler's philosophy. Namely, Nietzsche's second Untimely Meditation. The similarities between Spengler's treatment of history, and that of Nietzsche in this text, are quite striking once one moves beyond the standard interpretative confusion concerning the comparative paradox and grasps the correct characterisation of Spengler's philosophy of history.

My intention here is not to enter into a detailed exegetical review of Nietzsche's thought or pronouncement on the 'correct' interpretation of his second Untimely Meditation. I simply wish to suggest that there is one particular Nietzschean text that deals with the subject of history that, if read in a fairly straightforward way, casts considerable light on Spengler's work in a way that is extremely suggestive. Nietzsche's distinctions between dif-

³⁰ Spengler (1936), xiv.

³¹ Ibid. 24.

³² Farnetkopf (2001), 250.

ferent types of historical approach seem to apply to Spengler's treatment of history and if this is so, then we can classify Spengler's historical writing into monumental, antiquarian and critical modes. Thus Spengler could be viewed as employing conceptual distinctions in *The Decline* that Nietzsche introduces in his second meditation, and in a manner that further supports my argument in this paper for a primarily relativist understanding of Spengler's historical thought.

In *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* Nietzsche argues for the value of history not in terms of its objective truth but in terms of its utility. For Nietzsche history is useful insofar as it serves Life. Though Nietzsche stresses the necessity of history for Life he also indicates the importance of the ability to forget history, to discard those aspects of the past that no longer help but rather hinder the service of Life. He states that, 'the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture [emphasis removed].'³³ It is possible, on Nietzsche's account, to suffer from a surfeit of history.

Nietzsche identifies three different ways in which we tend to employ history, which he terms monumental, antiquarian, and critical history. The monumental view of history views the past a source of models for current life, such as the deeds of Great Men. These historical individuals provide exemplars of eternal heroic features that the contemporary individual can emulate in their own lives so that they too may achieve similar greatness in their own time. History of this sort provides reassurance to the 'man of the present' in that it shows 'that the greatness that once existed was in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again.'³⁴ Whilst monumental history offers stimulation to the 'man of deeds', antiquarian history is for reverent types, those who seek to preserve the past from which they came and to pass it on to future generations. An effect of such history is that those who imbibe it feel their present to be one with the past of their nation or culture, and that, however benighted their current circumstances, they represent the spirit or essence of their historical community. Whilst this conservative historical tendency preserves the life of a group, it does not develop it and Nietzsche warns of the dangers of an excess of such a historical sense. He states that:

33 Nietzsche (1997), 63.

34 Ibid. 69.

[...] it hinders any firm resolve to attempt something new, thus it paralyse the man of action who, as one who acts, will and must offend some piety or other.³⁵

Finally, critical history speaks to the reformer. It is an approach in which history is considered from the needs of the present and evaluated with regards to the extent that it currently serves Life. That which does not is to be destroyed, and that which is found that can be of advantage to the present can be used to fashion a 'second nature' based upon the new account of the past. It is, Nietzsche says:

[...] an attempt to give oneself, as it were a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate.³⁶

Space does not permit me to detail the numerous parallels between Spengler's historical viewpoint and the many implications that follow from Nietzsche's account, so I shall merely sketch out some of the more obvious similarities. Spengler portrays the inhabitant of Faustian civilisation, like Nietzsche's 'man of the present', as suffering from an excess of historical knowledge. The consumption of knowledge becomes the hallmark of a cultured individual, but it is knowledge that no longer stands in service to the furtherance of Life. Knowledge of past forms of cultural expression becomes more important than the creation of new forms of expression in the present. As a result, says Nietzsche:

we moderns have nothing whatever of our own; only by replenishing and cramming ourselves with the ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions, discourses of others do we become anything worthy of notice, that is to say, walking encyclopaedias...³⁷

Spengler's existential project and its related relativist philosophy of history operate in a manner akin to Nietzsche's critical history. They criticise the current use of the past as a substitute for present creativity and future development, and erect in its place an alternative historical narrative that frees the present from the dead hand of past symbolic structures and

35 Ibid. 75.

36 Ibid. 76.

37 Ibid. 79.

enables inventive use of novel forms of (technological) praxis. In this way one overcomes the alienating fixation on knowledge of the cultural past and attains the experience of culture as a vital, ongoing process.

When viewed in comparison with Nietzsche's historical types Spengler's positivist philosophy of history, with its laws of history and comparative analyses, appears as an ironic form of antiquarian history. Although fashioned to appeal to the science-fixated knowledge-consumers of Faustian civilisation, and hiding within it the practical implications (but not the existential ones) of Spengler's existential choice, the positivist model of cyclical history is designed to be retrospective in outlook. It reassures the Faustian that the civilisational present is just as much a natural part of Faustian culture as the preceding stages, that in embracing the unfamiliar forms of modern technology one is not carrying out a break with past practice but is rather continuing a thousand-year history of Faustian cultural creativity. The recapitulation in the life-cycle of Faustian culture of the structures of all the preceding world-cultures further emphasises the link between present civilisation and the great chain of human cultural history, and further normalises the apparent historical discontinuity of modernity. Indeed, lest the absence of super-historical and trans-cultural meaning perturb the conservative Faustian with its intimation that in the grand scheme of things no one culture is better or worse than any other, Spengler even allows the Faustian the comforting thought that whilst world-history is just the meaningless repetition of cultural forms it was Faustian culture alone that was capable of this insight. All cultures are equal but, Spengler consoles us, some are more equal than others.

Finally, I suggest that Spengler's sporadic references to Great Men in *The Decline* represent his, again ironic, version of Nietzsche's monumental history.³⁸ For the Faustian who needs a role model, a concrete historical figure, to inspire them to greatness, Spengler offers a selection of suitable Faustian candidates. He puts forward an impressive roster of artists, playwrights, musicians, amongst others, from Joachim of Floris to Nietzsche and Ibsen.³⁹ And yet Spengler does not appeal to some time-

less characteristics of heroic nature to justify his selection. For him it is the Great Men of Faustian Culture alone who offer models for the contemporary Faustian and these figures on Spengler's account share only one characteristic. They are:

fact-men of the grand style who are the representatives to-day of the Will-to-Power over other men's destinies and therefore of the Faustian ethic generally.⁴⁰

Aware of the past, they were not bound by it and selected from among their present possibilities the course of action that best expressed and furthered the ethos of their culture. In doing so, for Spengler, they served Life, for Life on his account is the process of effecting possibilities.⁴¹ In other words, the characteristic of Great Men to be emulated by the would-be Great Men of tomorrow is the characteristic that Spengler deems appropriate for the civilisational present. As with the antiquarian component of Spengler's philosophy, the narrative is engineered to lead to the same conclusion as his relativist critical history. This is the genius of Spengler's historical narrative: whether one finds in the pages of *The Decline* an antiquarian, monumental or critical history, the outcome is always the same. Namely, a resolve to embrace the technological forces of the present and to give their civilisational existence meaning by embarking upon the last hurrah of Faustian culture.

This brief comparison with Nietzsche's second Untimely Meditation indicates, I suggest, the variety of historical narratives at work in Spengler's *The Decline* and more importantly, the extent to which history in his philosophy always serves a contemporary philosophical purpose. In other words, Spengler's interest in history, at this stage in his intellectual development, was never for its own sake. He fashions fictional histories for an artificial culture with specific intent, to enable and shape its future development. And though Spengler employs all three of Nietzsche's types of historiography, I believe it is clear that he favours critical history. Jensen claims that for Nietzsche:

each of the types of life-serving historiography has as its task the construction of a story about the past, one that is to help its writers and readers exi-

⁴⁰ Ibid. 350.

⁴¹ Ibid. 37.

³⁸ Some commentators have made a great deal of Spengler's sporadic references to Great Men, suggesting that these individuals are a way of overcoming the comparative paradox. On such an account Great Men are a kind of historical *Krisatz Haderatz*, appearing every generation or so and with the mystical ability to overcome inter-cultural incommensurability and peer across time into the black box of an alien culture. Dray (1986), 122.

³⁹ Spengler (1926), 365.

stentially as a means of orienting ourselves to our past, present, and future lives.⁴²

With Spengler, however his employment of these forms is skewed by his desire to overcome the influence of the past. While all three forms orient the reader inasmuch as they all lead to the endorsement of Spengler's suggested technological future, it is the relativistic critical history alone that enables the Faustian individual to choose it in an existentially authentic manner.

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42. Jensen (2013), 85.