

HERR SPENGLER AND THE LIFE OF CIVILISATIONS: by CHRISTOPHER DAWSON.

It is now about a dozen years since Professor Flinders Petrie in his little book on "Revolutions of Civilisation" restated the theory of a cyclic movement in history, governing the rise and fall of cultures, a hypothesis which has attracted so many thinkers in the past—notably Vico and Campanella. Yet more recently this theory has become the centre of general interest and discussion on the Continent, thanks to Herr Spengler's striking application of it to the present state of Europe in his now famous book "The Decline of the West." Hitherto this work has attracted much less interest in England than elsewhere, partly no doubt on account of the difficulty of procuring German books during the latter part of the war, and indeed for some time afterwards. It was not accessible to me when I prepared the paper, delivered before the Sociological Society last December, on the Life of Civilisations. But even at the present time when the second volume of the work is on the eve of publication,* there may, I hope, still be room for a brief summary and discussion of Herr Spengler's theory. HERR SPENGLER's aim has been to create, not a philosophy of history in the old sense of the term, but a new, historical, kind of philosophy. It is by his intense feeling for the world as a living process, that the modern Western European differs most profoundly from the men of other ages and cultures. World history means infinitely more to him than it meant to the thinkers of ancient Greece or of India. To the latter at any rate, Time and consequently History, were without value or ultimate significance, to the modern European they are the very foundation of his conception of reality. Yet this sense of history has not found adequate expression in our philosophical systems. The metaphysicians of modern Europe, like their predecessors in classical antiquity, have viewed the world as a system, a great closed order resting on the principle of Causality, not a living organism. They have looked at the universe with the eyes of the physicist rather than with the eyes of the biologist, and have systematized it as the production of dead law instead of as the creation of living spirit. Nor have the historians themselves done better. They concentrate their attention on facts and events, they accumulate masses of detail without giving any heed to the informing Spirit which alone gives significance to the material circumstance. They view History "as a tape worm which tirelessly puts forth fresh 'Epochs,' instead of as a life-series of highly developed organisms."

IN Herr Spengler's view World History is nothing less than a "Second Cosmos," with a different content and a different law of movement to that of the first Cosmos, Nature, which has hitherto absorbed the

* This has now appeared (June, 1922.)

attention of the philosopher. It has its own internal law—*Schicksal* or Destiny, as distinguished from the law of Causality, which rules the world of Nature. That is to say, historical time is not mere numerical succession, it is the registration of a life process like the years of a man's life. Until the unities that lie behind the time cycles of history have been grasped, it is useless to try and explain historical change by secondary causes. But if it is possible to attain an internal knowledge of history, if we could grasp intuitively the principle that gives unity to an age or to a culture, then history will take an organic form, and we shall be able to see in all historic phenomena the expression of a moulding force behind the play of circumstances.

THIS unifying principle Herr Spengler finds in the spirit of the great world-cultures. He claims that each culture has an individual style or personality, which can be seized intuitively by whoever possesses a feeling for history, just as the individual genius of a great musician or artist can be recognised by the born critic in all his works. This individual style is not confined to the art or the social forms of a culture, as some have thought; it extends to philosophic thought, to science and to mathematics. Each culture has its distinctive *number*, so that there is a deep inner bond between the geometry of Euclid and the Greek tragedy, between algebra and arabesque, between the differential calculus and contrapuntal music. This principle of the organic interconnection of all the expressions of a particular culture is carried by Herr Spengler to paradoxical lengths. He maintains that there is an "intimate dependence of the most modern physical and chemical theories on the mythological conceptions of our Germanic forefathers": that Perspective in Painting, Printing, Credit, Long Range Artillery and Contrapuntal Music, are all of them expressions of one psychic principle, while the city State, the nude statue, Euclid and the Greek coin are alike expressions of another. There is, in fact, no human activity which is not the vehicle of the cultural soul; the most abstract scientific thought and the most absolute ethical systems are partial manifestations of a process which is bound up with a particular people and a geographical region, and have no validity outside the domain of their own culture.

THIS leads to the most fundamental philosophic relativism. "There are no eternal truths. Each philosophy is an expression of its own age, and only of its own age, and there are no two ages which possess the same philosophical intentions." The vital question for a philosopher is whether he embodies the *Zeitgeist*, "whether it is the soul of the age itself which speaks by his works and intuitions." Hitherto the philosophers have had no inkling of this truth. They have exalted the standards of conduct and the laws of thought of the modern Western European into absolute laws for humanity, they have not realised the possibility of a different soul and a different truth to their own. The

historians have shared their error. The civilisation that they saw around them was "Civilisation," the movement that brought it to maturity was "Progress." They did not dream that European civilisation was a limited episode like the civilisations of China and Yucatan.

THE time has come, Herr Spengler says, to make a revolution comparable to the abandonment of the geocentric astronomy, to introduce a new "Copernican" philosophy of history, which will study each culture by the laws of its own development, which will not subordinate the past to the present, or interpret the souls of other cultures by the standards that are peculiar to our own. The task of the true historian then must be to write the biographies of the great cultures as self contained wholes, which follow a similar course of growth and decay, but are as unrelated to one another as different planetary systems. These great cultures are eight in number, Egypt, Babylonia, India, China, the Maya culture of Central America, the culture of classical antiquity, the Arabian culture and the culture of Western Europe. There are in addition a few cultures which have failed to attain full development, such as those of the Hittites, the Persians and the Quichua.

THE dawn of a new culture is seen in the rise of a new mythology, which finds expression in the heroic saga and epic. Herr Spengler instances the Vedic mythology for India, the Olympian mythology and the Homeric poems for Antiquity, primitive Christianity and the Gospels for the "Arabian" culture, and "Germanic Catholicism" and the Nibelungenlied for Western Europe. In the next stage—"summer"—the culture attains to full self consciousness. This is the time of the rise of the characteristic philosophies, and the building up of a new mathematic, which is, in Herr Spengler's view, perhaps the most fundamental criterion by which to fathom the essence of a culture. Pythagoras and Descartes, Parmenides and Galileo are the representatives of this phase.

"AUTUMN" is marked by a loosening of social cohesion, by the growth of rationalism and individualism. At the same time the creative power of a culture finds its final expression in the great conclusive philosophical systems, and in the work of the great mathematicians. It is the period of Plato and Aristotle, of Goethe and Kant, but also of the Sophists and the Encyclopædists.

IN "Winter" the inner development of a culture is complete. After the triumph of the irreligious and materialistic weltanschauung, "Culture" passes away into "Civilisation," which is its inorganic, fossilized counterpart, and which finds its spiritual expression in a cosmopolitan and ethical propaganda, such as Buddhism, Stoicism and 19th century Socialism. A similar course of development is traced in art, in economics and in political organisation, and at the root of the whole process lies the Life of a People in its intimate connection with a definite geographical region, so that the passing of

a culture is at the same time the passing of a people from the land that has fed and nursed it, into the melting pot of cosmopolitanism, the birth of a new population of "déracinés."

EVERY historic culture must pass through this life process, just as every human being must pass through the same life cycle from birth to death. And consequently each phase in the life of a particular culture finds its analogy in every other culture. Each event or personality possesses not only a local and temporary importance, it has also a symbolic meaning, as temporary representative of a universal type. There is not merely a superficial historical parallel, there is an organic identity between the place of Napoleon in our culture and that of Alexander in antiquity, between the Sophists and the Encyclopædists, between the Ramessides and the Antonines. This principle is of the greatest importance for Herr Spengler's theory. By its use he claims that it will be possible not only to reconstruct vanished civilisations, as the palæontologist reconstructs some prehistoric creature from a single bone, but even to establish a law for the "Pre-determination of History," so that when once the underlying idea of a culture has been grasped, it will be possible to foretell the whole course of its growth and the actual dates of its principal phases.

HERR SPENGLER'S aim throughout his work is in fact a practical one. He wishes to plot out the descending curve of Western Civilisation, to make the present generation conscious of the crisis through which it is passing and of the true task that lies before it.

DER UNTERGANG DES ABENDLANDES is nothing else but the final passing of the Western Culture and the coming of "Civilisation." Consequently the "architectonic" possibilities of the Western soul have been realised, and there remains only the practical task of conservatism. The age has no more a need of artists and philosophers and poets, it calls for men of "Roman hardness," engineers, financiers, and organisers, of the type of Cecil Rhodes.

It is Herr Spengler's desire that the men of the new generation should turn to "der Technik statt der Lyrik, der Marine statt der Malerei, der Politik statt der Erkenntnisskritik." The governing movement of the new age is to be Socialism, not the Socialism of the idealist or the revolutionary, but a practical, organising, imperialist Socialism which stands as far from the latter, as did the world city of the Roman lawyer and governor from the world City of the Stoic theorists.

HERE then is the final task of the German people. As the 2nd century before Christ saw Rome step into the place of the Hellenistic monarchies, so Prussia takes over the direction of the world from France and England.* The hour of Cannæ is past, the coming age will

*Herr Spengler's book was of course published during the course of the war (1917).

be the age of Caesar. And in the East there is a redness in the sky—the first sign of the dawn of the new Russian culture of the future.

To the English mind, ever suspicious of the theorist, and perhaps of the historical theorist more than others, Herr Spengler's views may seem so fantastic as to be hardly worth consideration. I write however from the standpoint of one who is a firm believer in the organic life of civilisation, and of the existence of a cyclic movement in history, which determines the main phases of the life of peoples. The time is surely ripe for the abandonment of what Herr Spengler calls the Ptolemaic view of history, and for the beginnings of a scientific morphology of culture. But the new science is in its infancy, and it is a bold step to attempt at this early stage a detailed predetermination of history, such as we find in "*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*." Such a scheme can only be carried through by a drastic selection of facts, and indeed Herr Spengler has not avoided that pitfall of over simplification which has proved the ruin of so many earlier philosophies of history.

THUS while fully admitting that the principle of "the life of peoples" is at the root of the cyclic movement in history, one hesitates to confine all cultural achievement to the 8 or 12 culture-peoples, each of which is responsible for a complete and independent civilisation. There is little room in Herr Spengler's scheme for cultural interaction and admixture, still less for the co-operation of several peoples in one civilisation.

THUS in the culture of the Ancient World everything must be explained as the life work of two culture peoples, the Greeks and the Romans. The last vital act of this culture was the building of the Roman Empire—a vast work of material organisation. After that, there is nothing but petrification and death. How then are we to explain the cultural phenomena of the Imperial epoch—the rise of Christianity, the philosophy of Plotinus, the mathematics of Diophantus and the renewal of architecture and art? Herr Spengler answers that all this is the work of a new people, it belongs to the first stages of the Arab culture-cycle, which develops itself under the crust of the dying classical civilisation. The heroic mythos, which marks the dawn of the consciousness of this new people is embodied in the Gospels and in primitive Christianity, as that of the Greeks was expressed in the Homeric poems and in the Olympian mythology. The Pantheon at Rome is the *Urmoschee*—the starting point of Arab architecture, and with Diophantus we first come into contact with a new mathematic as foreign from the Hellenic geometry, as is the "Magic" arabesque spirit of that culture from the "Olympian," statuesque spirit of Hellenism.

Is Herr Spengler justified in thus calling up a new racial culture like a *deus ex machina* to cut the knots of his historical problem? Certainly the new elements in later Hellenistic civilisation may be explained as due to Oriental influences, but these influences come not

from the budding energies of a new people, but from older peoples whose cultural development was even older than that of the Hellenes. The "heroic" phase of Arab culture, is to be found in the stories of 'Antara the son of Sheddad, Hatim et-T'ai, Chanfara and the other open-handed bloodthirsty heroes of Arab legend—in the wars that sprang from the rivalry of the horse Dahis and the mare Ghabra, all of which is far more comparable to the spirit of the Homeric poems than the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospels and Primitive Christianity belong rather to the last stage of the Judæo-Aramæan culture—a culture which had expressed its "heroic" phase a thousand years earlier in the sagas of Samson, of Deborah, of Gideon and the like. All this results from Herr Spengler's over simplification which only allows him to take account of a single people in dealing with a particular civilisation. In reality it is impossible to simplify to this degree any civilisation except the most primitive ones. So long as a people exists it possesses a cultural tradition, and however depressed and passive this may seem in relation to the creative culture of the dominant people in a world civilisation, it is nevertheless capable of far-reaching influences and reactions. Professor Flinders Petrie in his well-known study on the Revolutions of Civilization brings evidence to prove that a single people—such as the Egyptian—passes through successive culture-cycles; and though it is probable that without external influence or the infusion of fresh blood such cycles would tend to become stereotyped repetitions of the culture that has been previously worked out (as is perhaps the case in modern China), yet if once these stereotyped cultures were brought into contact with a new civilisation, they would possess great potentialities for cultural influence. Thus, for example, in dealing with Islam we must not only take account of the culture of the Arabs of Arabia, who created the original Islamic State. There is also the Byzantine-Syro-Egyptian culture of the Levant, an old mature civilisation which influenced Islam from the cradle; there is the Sassanian-Persian culture which had a vital influence on Islam even before the days of the Abbasids; there is the culture of Khorasan and TransOxiana, mainly Persian, but possibly containing a Bactrian Greek element, and certainly affected by Indian Buddhist influence; finally there are the non-cultured peoples—the Turks who were for centuries in contact with Persian and Chinese civilisation, the Berbers, who had previously been under the influence of the Roman-Hellenistic culture, and last of all the negroes. All these cultures and peoples brought their contributions to the civilisation of mediæval Islam, so that under the surface uniformity of Arabic language and religion and institutions, an extraordinary process of fermentation and change was taking place.

AGAIN take the apparently much simpler case of our own Western European culture. Here we have several peoples, composed of

different racial elements, all co-operating in the development of a common culture heritage. The life-cycles of these peoples do not necessarily synchronize, nor do they all come under the influence of the common culture-heritage in the same measure. Italy was in the direct line of the Graceo-Roman tradition which only lightly affected the civilisation of the Baltic lands. Yet Herr Spengler takes the view that the whole of our civilisation is essentially the work of one people—the Germans. Consequently he begins its life-cycle, not with the Barbarian Invasions, as the parallel of the ancient world would suggest, but in the centuries which produced the Crusades, the Nibelungenlied and Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parsifal. This initial error falsifies his whole series of analogies between the ancient and modern cultures. He compares the Athenian democracy to the Bourbons instead of to Renaissance Italy, the age of Alexander to that of Napoleon instead of to the first European expansion in the 16th century, and the present age to that of the early Punic wars instead of to the Imperial epoch. Hence the depressing character of his forecast, since he would have us spend the next two centuries in that work of material organisation which has actually occupied us for the last 200 years.

IN reality since our civilisation is the work of several peoples it embraces several parallel life-cycles. The most representative of these is no doubt that of the French, which stands mid-way between the early ripening of the Italians and the late maturity of the Germans. Indeed in many respects France has a similar importance for our culture to that which Hellas possessed for the culture of antiquity. Nevertheless this is but an average standard, and it can only be applied with exactitude to the French portion of the Western European culture-area.

MOREOVER it is clear that in order to explain the life of civilisations it is not sufficient to possess a formula for the life-cycle of individual peoples, we must also understand the laws of cultural interaction and the causes of the rise and fall of the great cultural syncretisms, which seem to overshadow the destinies of individual peoples. Considered from this point of view the last stage of a culture, the phase to which Herr Spengler confines the name of "Civilisations," acquire peculiar importance. It is not merely a negative period of petrification and death, as he describes it; it is the time when civilisation is most open to external influence. The true significance of the Roman Hellenistic period, for example, is not decay but syncretism. Two different streams of culture, which we describe loosely as "Oriental" and "Western," as "Asiatic" and "European" flowed for several centuries in the same bed, mingling with one another to such a degree that they seemed to form a new civilisation. And this intermingling of culture was not merely of importance for the past as the conclusion of the old world, it had a decisive influence on the future. The passing of ancient civilisation and the coming of a new age, is marked, it is

true, by these two streams once more separating and flowing out again to East and West as the new Daughter Cultures of Islam and Western Europe, though the central river bed is still occupied for a time by the dwindling stream of the Byzantine civilisation. Nevertheless the two streams continued to bear witness to their common origin. The West was moulded by a religion of the Levant, the East carried on for centuries the tradition of Hellenic philosophy and science. Aristotle and Galen travelled to India with the Moslems, to Scotland and Scandinavia with the Christians. Roman law lived on alike with the mediæval canonists and the Ulema of Islam. But because Islam inherited so largely from the Hellenistic-Oriental culture of Roman times Herr Spengler is not justified in giving an Arabic origin to the latter; the Arabs entered into the cultural inheritance in the East, just as the Germanic peoples did in the West, as heirs not as originators. And as East and West, each in its own measure, have received the inheritance of Hellenic culture, so too is it with the tradition of Israel. Without that tradition neither Christendom nor Islam is conceivable; each claims it as its peculiar birth-right. It is interwoven with the very texture of the Koran; it lives on in modern Europe; indeed it was nowhere stronger than it has been in the new countries—in Calvinist Scotland, in Lutheran Scandinavia, in Puritan New England. And it was in the same age of syncretism, the mature period of the Hellenistic-Oriental culture, that the Jewish tradition acquired these new contacts and opportunities for expression. Since then the different culture streams have been flowing away from one another, but they still bear the indelible character set upon them by that decisive period of intercourse and fusion.

HENCE there appears to be ample evidence for the existence of two movements in history; one of which is intimately connected, as Herr Spengler shows, with the life of an individual people in contact with a definite geographical environment, while the other is common to a number of different peoples, and results from political, intellectual and religious synthesis and interaction. Only by taking account of both these movements, is it possible to understand the general movement of history and explain that real element of integration and progress, which causes different civilisations to be, not closed worlds without meaning for one another, but progressive stages in the life of humanity.

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON.