

History as Crisis: Insights from a Mimetic Philosophy of History

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Dedications

Ad majorem Dei gloriam.

To those committed to me and my success throughout this journey:

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This work has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution. This work is original and a result of the candidates own research endeavour.

Signed: _____

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Abstract

A central aspect of René Girard's Mimetic theory is the eruptive interpersonal violence facilitated by humanity's propensity toward imitative desire turned rivalry. At the heart of this process is a crisis; a moment in which the imminent threat of an all-encompassing violence unconsciously leads humanity towards a compromise: apocalyptic communal violence or the scapegoat. Girard, in his final work *Battling to the End*, wishes for his theory to be applied within the philosophy of history. In this thesis, an attempt is made to trace the history of civilizational collapse and pursuant crises via the works of Oswald Spengler, who offers us a framework within which to apply Girard's theories and, in so doing, analyse the main line of modern philosophical thought regarding the overarching meaning of history, while using mimetic theory as their counterpoint.

The aim of this analysis is to identify how mimetic theory can inform us as to the mechanism of cultural and rise and decline to analyse whether Girard provides an alternative to the prevailing philosophical conclusions represented by Spengler's work: fatalism or idealist utopianism. Through an analysis of the concept of crisis, this thesis will show that Girard's, or rather, the Gospel's uncovering of the mimetic mechanism in history and its attending crises has both exacerbated this existential problem while simultaneously providing us with a new historical scenario in which cultural-apocalyptic violence could be avoided.

Introduction

We are being protected from hysterics. Isn't that what they call it? Maniacs! The world's been in a habitual state of crisis for fifty years. Fifty? What am I saying? It's been in a habitual state of crisis since the beginning – but for half a century now, almost unbearable. And why, for the love of God? What is the fundamental irritant, the essence of the tension? Political Philosophies? Economics? Population pressure? Disparity of culture and creed? Ask a dozen experts, get a dozen answers. Now Lucifer again. Is this species congenitally insane, Brother? If we're born mad, where's the hope of Heaven? Through Faith alone? Or isn't there any?¹

That we are living in a time of crisis is not deniable. Or is it? And, if we are, what category of crisis are we in the midst of experiencing and what, if anything, does this experience entail?

No matter where we turn or to what distraction we commit ourselves, crisis, whether as political tool, media alarm bell or literary trope, assaults us from all angles. Greta Thunberg jeopardises her childhood education and strikes against her local government due to what she perceives (with the endorsement of many experts) to be the crisis of our climate. Around the world, communities have attempted to defund policing and statues which had stood for centuries are being vandalised, damaged and, in some cases, destroyed due to what major media suppliers are calling a crisis in race relations – itself accelerated through a crisis of effective interracial communication. When we look toward our financial markets, we are quickly reminded that the state of global finances, our share portfolio and personal

¹ Walter Michael Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (London, England: Gateway, 2014), 259.

superannuation is itself in crisis and on the cusp of a full-blown recession. As a suitable backdrop to this menagerie of crises, our political editors warn us at every occasion that our nation, or, by extension, the Western World, is on the doorstep of a political and diplomatic crisis which will engulf our world in a catastrophic war in which we will be left helpless due to the crisis of our government and military budget all while, within our borders, a vast array of humanitarian crises and social injustices unfold. The above is all happening in the midst of a global health crisis brought on by the novel Covid-19 virus, which has essentially shut down and closed nations and borders, very likely aggravating the pre-existing crises and introducing new ones.

What is the casual observer, passively digesting this bombardment of various crises, to make of her or his situation in the world and history? Is what the layman reads and receives over radio and infrared waves true? Can we sum up our current experience of the world as a host of prolific yet mostly separate set of crises each representing a unique problem requiring a unique solution? To use a more vulgar metaphor, are the current crop of crises merely a scattered and unrelated outbreak of bodily boils and sores each requiring their own respective treatment and period of convalescence? Or, is it a possibility that a large majority of these varying, smaller crises are the symptoms of a larger, overarching crisis? That is, to recycle the above metaphor again, are the boils and sores not extraneous to one another but, rather, being caused and connected by a more malignant, undiagnosed disease? Can these phenomena even be labelled as crises? What is a crisis to start with?

It would seem here that the observer is precisely that: an observer. While she or he is inundated with constant reminders of her or his impending doom, certainty in political and social institutions is something that comes at a premium, and arriving at any such certainty becomes more and more impossible when trying to navigate our way through the kaleidoscope of natural and man-made crises. It is only natural, then, since any action

bringing relief to one particular crisis may, in turn, exacerbate another, that ennui and apathy in some ways present themselves as the most principled of instincts. Therefore, a more important question arises from our above meditations, and that is: is passivity in the face of historical crises or directed activity the better option? To complicate matters further, are both of these attitudes, in a sense, historical red herrings which can do nothing to halt, avoid or alleviate the unfolding of the crisis to its completion, whether that be in its fizzling out or the fully realised ruin of the object in a crisis-state? Lastly, are there any precedents of the crises we are witnessing today in the annals of history, and have we reached a level of privileged historical self-awareness in which a “new” path has been opened to those who perceive it? Essentially, the question being asked is: have we learned anything at all when it comes to historical crises and how to deal with them?

One more question begs asking, and it is a question which may seem leading but nonetheless requires some level of reflection: if history is the object of our critique in this search for relief from crises, what if our culture, in this case, Western culture, and its history are itself in crisis?

Many problems arise when this last question presents itself, which requires us to frame the structure of our questioning and assess just how far I intend to take the investigation. Limits here are required, especially when the focus of my investigations is the movement and underlying meaning of history itself. Nonetheless, although this thesis acknowledges the perceived fancifulness and difficulties of the above endeavour, an attempt will be made here to understand the phenomenon of these mounting crises and their relationship to the perception of civilizational decline as described by two theoretically disparate yet, in relation to the above phenomena, peculiarly aligned thinkers who may, through a sort of fusion of their work, be able to provide us with a way to find a meaning within this cavalcade of crises

– one which could possibly explain a vast majority of these crises as having their cause in a larger, impersonal mechanism – namely, the mechanism of history itself.

Such an undertaking might appear dubious, particularly if it seems to want to provide a one-size-fits-all explanation for every crisis currently being experienced. This is not the intention of this writing. This thesis does not aim to diminish the singularity of each separate crisis and the need of focused attention towards each.² This thesis also does not intend to trivialise the combined effort required from the varying sciences and the multifaceted cooperation needed in order to even begin to prognosticate on solutions for the crises let alone avoid them. Stating this, however, should not mean that some investigation toward an overarching cause for many of these crises should be avoided. On the contrary, the philosophy of history requires an almost constant level of re-assessment as the phenomenon being assessed, history, is in a constant state of unfolding, and the revelations this provides compel its students to revisit the writings of those who have written extensively on the subject and to incorporate some of the theories of writers themselves emerging from history with new insights with which to shine a light on its mysteries. One theory presented in this dissertation is that it is precisely due to some of the predominating philosophies, when applied to history, that crippling passivity or frenetic over-activity in the face of cultural crises have seemingly become the only logical recourse to those caught up in its effects. Indeed, this contradiction in attitudes when experiencing crises was the predominant motivation for the following investigation. Why is it, that when confronted with a crisis which, for all intents and purposes, is existential, do we vacillate between stoic non-action in the face of history's directionality or an overzealous obsession with controlling this self-same

² At this preliminary stage of the dissertation, I will use the word *crisis* as commonly understood and utilised. As we venture further into the work, this term, its etymology and evolution, will be investigated further in order to arrive at an understanding of the word which will both remain loyal to its original, intended meaning, while simultaneously providing our conversation with a definition with which to launch our deeper analysis.

direction? What is it about our current philosophies that engenders these attitudes, and is this double-pronged sentiment the only option available to us?

In order to begin untangling some of these complexities, I will be leaning primarily on two thinkers: Oswald Spengler and René Girard. On the surface, these two philosophers may seem far removed from each other, not only chronologically but in terms of their respective oeuvres. The former was a member of Hitler's NSDAP,³ and his main interest in political-science (and, by inference, his aspirations for a political career) led him to write a history of philosophy detailing the rise and decline of cultures while embedding this process with, firstly, a will and, secondly, an organic element. This came to be known as his "morphology" of history. The work referenced above is, of course, *The Decline of the West*, a book which, while existing in the undercurrent of political-historical thought, has nonetheless wielded tremendous influence within the field of the philosophy of history with such adherents as Henry Kissinger and Steve Bannon. The latter, René Girard, was an under-recognised thinker, who, over decades, introduced to the world his conceptual magnum opus, mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism, which continues to inspire novel conceptual reassessments throughout the humanities and social sciences. Once again, on the surface there is not much to connect the esoteric political hopeful to the medieval archivist turned cultural anthropologist; however, what Girard was able to intimate through his studies was that the mechanism he identified above has had, and continues to have, a tremendous effect on cultures. In identifying imitative desire, which he called mimetic, Girard was able to unveil the influence desire has wielded not only in individual/psychological formation, but in the formation of cultures as a whole – in fact, for Girard, mimetic desire and its avalanche of effects are the direct cause of hominization, let alone enculturation.

³ The National Socialist German Workers' Party, or, the NAZI Party.

In Girard's scheme, everything proceeds from the rivalries which imitative desire produces and from the workings of the mechanism, which eventuate in the murder/expulsion of a scapegoat and the deification of said victim, which, in turn, leads to the birth of everything we recognise in archaic societies: prohibitions, taboos, ritual and the peripheral structures built around these. While Girard is not as specific in his details about cultural decline and eventual death as he is about the process of cultural and human beginnings, we can surmise a scenario based on some of the specifics in his work regarding now-dead cultures, such as the Mayans. In this examination he frames the destruction of their civilisation as being due to the eventual victory of violence over the cultural institutions meant to keep it at bay, leading essentially to a Hobbesian relapse into violent, interpersonal savagery.

It is here where our link to Spengler becomes more tenable: in his analysis of cultural death he also identifies a period of violent inter-cultural bloodshed as the precedent to the cultural death-knell, totalitarianism.⁴ However, a coincidental agreement does not seem enough to warrant a study on Spengler; so why him?

The argument can certainly be made that as far as philosophers of history go, there have been what can be described as far more "important" or "influential" thinkers in this realm, such as its inaugurator Giambattista Vico, Johann-Gottfried Herder and Karl Marx, not to mention Hegel. Additionally, even in the past century there have been thinkers whose theories have arguably met with more mainstream academic acceptance beyond Spengler's nuanced and mystical rhetoric, such as Arnold Toynbee or Herbert Spencer; however, a word on this particular discipline is required in order to justify this choice of thinker.

⁴ Spengler used and preferred the term *Caesarism*.

Since the inception or at least the assertion of the philosophy of history by Giambattista Vico in the sixteenth century, the discipline has seen a difference in the approach towards the question of the underlying meaning of history. At its origin, this discipline found itself falling, categorically, into the realm of theodicy or eschatology, which implied a religiously ordained directionality of history. Was history cyclical or a constant movement of progression? As we passed through the Enlightenment, which rejected religious explanations, divine providence was replaced by human rationality as the central drive of this progression towards the coming utopia. This scenario provided fertile ground for thinkers to consider micro-socio-historical phenomena and their progression through humanity's rational ages, such as Adam Smith's⁵ consideration of human rationality in the constant unfolding of then-modern European economics and the possibilities therein for the idyllic future. However, as history itself unfolded, and Western culture's golden-age (according to the idealistic thinkers of the time) seemed to give way to its direct counter-part – industrial dystopias and the threat of total war – the focus shifted towards what has been described by some as *meta*-history, that is, the search to provide a macro-interpretation that brought order to world-history in the continued effort to find the direction history was heading.⁶ Of these meta-historians, Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, Owen Lattimore and Karl August Wittfogel,⁷ who wrote contemporaneously and released works within years of one another, seem to be those most noteworthy. And, indeed, of these thinkers, Spengler seems to be standing the test of time: citations regarding his *Decline of the West* far outnumber those of his contemporaries, even if

⁵ See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Roy Hucheson Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner .*Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1976)

⁶ Little, Daniel. "Philosophy of History" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta (Winter Edition 2020)

⁷ Ibid.

most of these references to Spengler are backhanded and dismissive.⁸ Nonetheless, although we have seen an increase of interest in the public field due to the turbulent political climate of the last half-a-decade, serious academic attention is still lacking toward a figure who, although expelled, as it were, from the academies, managed to capture the imagination and continue to arouse controversy to this very day. After all, why did the Frankfurt School, particularly Theodor Adorno, find in Spengler a worthy interlocutor even though they, for the most part, disagreed with his work? What did Adorno see that he thought was worth engaging with? What was it about Spengler that so thoroughly captivated Wittgenstein and influenced his thought?⁹ What did Max Weber see in Spengler's work that motivated him to publicly debate him in the *Rathaus* in 1920? Why did Henry Kissinger, arguably the most influential (if not infamous) diplomat of the twentieth century decide to write his undergraduate thesis in Harvard on Spengler? And why, almost a century after the publication of *Decline of the West*, has former Chief Strategist of the White House, Steve Bannon's news publication *Breitbart*, publicly named Oswald Spengler as the spiritual predecessor of the "Alt-Right"?¹⁰

It must be stated at this introductory stage that this thesis rejects the claims of some of Spengler's most ardent advocates that his predictions vis-à-vis modern civilisational decline have been realised on an empirical basis. Rather, what is most useful for the purpose of this discussion is the way in which Spengler has been afforded a historical prescience through

⁸ "Since its publication in 1918, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* has been the object of academic controversy and opprobrium. In their efforts to dispose of it, scholars have resorted to a variety of tactics: bitter invective, icy scorn, urbane mockery, or simply pretending that the book is not there." Henry Stewart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler, a Critical Estimate*. (Twentieth Century Library. New York; London: C. Scribner's Sons. 1952.), i

⁹ Much more on Spengler's influence on Wittgenstein can be found in the above-mentioned work by Hughes and William J. DeAngelis, *Ludwig Wittgenstein - A Cultural Point of View: Philosophy in the Darkness of this Time*. (Farnham: United Kingdom. Ashgate Publishing. 2007), which traces the enormous debt Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* owes to Spengler's *The Decline of the West*.

¹⁰ Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right" *Breitbart*. (March 29, 2016).

subsequent writers that have recycled and reinterpreted his methodology for the purpose of both affirming their own biases while finding, in Spengler, a path towards their own intellectual or political objectives.

We will see this in Chapter 3 concerning the concept of *crisis*, nonetheless, it can be said of Spengler that he has had more of an influence than previously given credit for, if not indirectly. From the political influence on Kissinger who, in his PhD dissertation on Spengler, believed him to have made ‘startlingly accurate predictions’¹¹ whose ‘imagination pointed the way towards insights of profound and compelling beauty’¹², to the influence on many of the comparative religionists and modern advocates of perennialism such as Joseph Campbell who wrote that ‘Spengler had become my major prophet’¹³, many who took his work seriously, and saw empirical substantiation of his prophecies have, themselves, gone on to influence, in their own way, much of today’s modern political and, even, spiritual discourse. This is not equivalent to me asserting that Spengler has been proved right. The important point is that some believe that he has.

More importantly, for the purposes of this dissertation, Spengler, who has re-captured the public’s imagination, provides to Girard a workable foundation for a history of philosophy from the lens of mimetic theory. While this was never Spengler’s intention, nor, from what can be gathered, has Girard ever mentioned Spengler, there is an interesting interplay between the two theories which allows for a theoretical superimposition: through a selective

¹¹ Henry Kissinger, “The Meaning of History: Reflections on Spengler, Toynbee and Kant.” (Undergraduate Honours Thesis, Harvard University, 1951.) 112
<https://ia903000.us.archive.org/23/items/HenryAKissingerTheMeaningOfHistoryReflectionsOnSpenglerToynbeeAndKant/Henry%20A%20Kissinger%20-%20The%20Meaning%20of%20History%20Reflections%20on%20Spengler%2C%20Toynbee%2C%20and%20Kant.pdf>

¹² Ibid., 131

¹³ T. Reed Smith, “The Influence of Spengler and Toynbee on Joseph Campbell (and *Vice Versa?*)” *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 63: No. 63. 82
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol63/iss63/9>

re-reading of each thinker, a new historical narrative can be written wherein Spengler's history fills in many of the historical gaps for Girard's mimetic mechanism while Spengler's historical determinism, through the imposition of mimetic theory, can be re-assessed and re-directed.

Clearly, this introduces a new difficulty regarding impartiality and championing one "historical narrative" over the other. It is in this place that a disclaimer must be made that this will inevitably be the case. In fact, as has been shown in some recent works, an evaluative stance beyond the analytical becomes unavoidable when in the process of comparing cultures and the milieu in which an ethos took root and grew.¹⁴ Attempts have been made, for example, by Alisdair MacIntyre to create a "narrative" of the West's ethical history and, in so doing, evaluate from his contemporary standpoint the nature of this history and its effects on Western culture. This point of a "narrative" is extremely important to us when discussing all history but particularly in the philosophical treatment of history. According to Hayden White, impartiality in the realm of a history of philosophy is impossible due to the very nature of historical writing. White labels all historical work as "a verbal structure in the form of a

¹⁴ Although not mentioned at length in this dissertation, a huge debt is owed to the work of Alisdair MacIntyre, in particular Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. (New York; London: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc. 2011) In the preface to this work, MacIntyre explains that in his analysis of the contemporary ethical landscape, while "affirming the heterogeneity of moral beliefs, practices and concepts" it clearly dawned on him that he was nonetheless committing himself to "evaluations of different particular beliefs, practices and concepts" and in so doing admits that he "could not but be, informed by a distinctive evaluative standpoint". Additionally, it was in MacIntyre's method that the impetus to apply this to my own work was conceived as MacIntyre states, "I gave, or tried to give, for example, accounts of the rise and decline of different moralities ... More particularly I seemed to be asserting that the nature of moral community and moral judgement *in distinctively modern societies was such that it was no longer possible to appeal to moral criteria in a way that had been possible in other times and places [...]*" (xviii, my italics). MacIntyre traces his narrative, coloured by a distinctive evaluative standpoint, of the history of ethics in an attempt to understand how we have arrived at our contemporary ethical milieu and what, if anything, we can learn from this history. The process in this dissertation will correspond to this in that it will try to trace the history of civilizational collapse and pursuant crises via Spengler while evaluating the processes of the past and possible direction in the future through the lens of Girard's mimetic theory.

narrative prose discourse”¹⁵ and argues that historical writing, in general, is heavily influenced by literary writing in its reliance on narrative for meaning.¹⁶

With the above in mind, we can now summarise the aim of this dissertation, which makes no claim to an objective impartiality. According to Spengler’s historical analysis, Western culture is in the midst of a decline. This decline, while unfolding slowly over centuries, is marked by certain historically recurring stages or “events,” which Spengler has identified in “contemporaneous” stages in the life-cycle of various cultures that survived the pastoral era and evolved into “civilisations”. These events are pre-destined and, hence, unavoidable, and Spengler’s conclusive remarks regarding the future can be described as stoically pessimistic. Spengler, through his identification of historically re-appearing cultural phenomena, was able, quite successfully, at least according to Adorno,¹⁷ to create an accurate narrative of the history and metaphysical motivations of Western culture up to the point of his writing the *Decline* and to accurately predict¹⁸, for the most part according to historical hindsight, the

¹⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*. (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore. 1973), 1.

¹⁶ “Histories (and philosophies of history as well) combine a certain amount of ‘data’, theoretical concepts for ‘explaining’ these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past. In addition, I maintain, they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically [*sic*] accepted paradigm of what a distinctively ‘historical’ explanation should be. This paradigm functions as the ‘metahistorical element in all historical works that are more comprehensive in scope than the monograph or archival report.” Ibid.

¹⁷ In his essay “Was Spengler Right?,” Adorno concedes that Spengler’s historical insights were more profound than those of his contemporaries and, more importantly, that his insights and predictions were more far-reaching. In fact, Adorno saw the rise of Nazism as a direct confirmation of Spengler’s analysis of Caesarism and force-politics.

¹⁸ Many of his predictions are not mentioned in this dissertation; however, Spengler was one of the first thinkers to write about an impending ecological disaster (Spengler blames the Western “souls” Faustian Will-to-Power and its continual striving for the infinite), and even predicted the instantaneous, mass-communication which would become the norm for global citizens long after his death: “I see, long after A.D. 2000, cities laid out for ten to twenty million inhabitants, spread over enormous areas of country-side, with buildings that will dwarf the biggest of today’s and notions of traffic and communication that we should regard as fantastic to the point of madness.” Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West, Vol 2*:

path of civilizational decline that the West would take. However, prior to this death, Spengler predicted that from roughly the year 2000 to 2200, Western civilisation would enter into a period of pre-death emergency, including the “increasing primitiveness of political forms,” the “inward decline of the nations into a formless population” with “...increasing crudity and despotism”¹⁹ and, the main concern for this thesis, the stage Spengler calls the “period of contending states” in which the civilisation enters an age of gigantic conflicts which open the door to the final stage of civilisation – Caesarism, or the age of despots. It is largely this “pre-death emergency” which will be looked at as it will come to be known in this thesis as not only falling under our definition of crisis, but as being *the* crisis among all other peripheral crises. This is for three main reasons: first, as we will see, a pre-death emergency essentially approximates to the original meaning in the etymology of crisis as defined by Hippocrates, although originally limited to the field of medicine; and, second, Spengler himself believed that the beginnings of this emergency were becoming visible in his contemporary setting which saw his home-nation, Germany, on the cusp of what would become World War One – an incoming event Spengler saw as the major crisis of his age, the meaning of which his work was attempting to uncover. Third, crucially, this brings us back to the briefly abovementioned work of Girard who, although intellectually separated from Spengler, also saw, in his own analysis of the cultural effects of the mimetic mechanism, a period of extreme, inter-cultural violence in an advanced civilisation which preceded, or was concomitant with, its death. However, as will be seen in our chapter on Girard, whereas Spengler concludes after his dizzying attempt at analysing the secrets of history in this and later works that “all optimism is cowardice” in the face of the impersonal mechanisms of history, Girard, armed with his

Perspectives in World History. ed. David G. Payne. (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform. 2014), 69.

¹⁹ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West, Vol 1: Form and Actuality*. Ed. David G. Payne. (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform. 2014), 363.

mimetic theory and a deep understanding of its impressions on a culture, provides an alternative to Spengler's determinism. Girard's theory serves not only to complement the majority of Spengler's historical analysis but, where it counts in terms of our contemporary philosophical state, provides a new angle from which to read Spengler's work. The superimposition of Girard's mimetic theory will not only co-opt Spengler's narrative, but, in the argument of this thesis, will modify it while also providing us with the theoretical means to avoid the incoming catastrophe.

The aim of this thesis is both expository and exploratory. First, since our exploration of our historical crisis relies on the works of two primary thinkers, some preliminary work must be completed with regards to gaining a basic, yet nuanced, understanding of related concepts of their work as it pertains to our overall examination. Since our overall examination is on the identification of historical crises and the possibility of their aversion, we must also qualify the use of this loaded word, crisis, and provide some insight into its etymological and cultural history not only to properly define and defend our use of it, but also to explore whether an objective, universal application is even possible through its various evolutions. With an understanding of the theories of both thinkers and a critical analysis of culture, this thesis will attempt to unify the theories of both thinkers with the purpose of creating a single narrative with which to critically examine the possibilities of averting an apocalyptic and, according to both thinkers, immanent crisis; Spengler, for the many reasons mentioned above and for his heavy focus on history and the contemporaneous stages of civilizational collapse with culturally specific examples, and Girard, for his almost ahistorical, that is chronologically non-specific, approach at analysing the engine of history.

It is hoped that, in this theoretical combination, it will be possible to identify both the narrative of various cultures – their birth, decline and corresponding phenomena – along with the workings of the ahistorical, ever recurring, mimetic mechanism and its effects on this

process. In this superimposition it will hopefully be seen how the violent sacred, at first, cultivates the birth and initial prosperity of a culture and, through the various historical machinations arising from its cure-turned-poison, ends up destroying it. Lastly, through this combination of two independent thinkers, we may examine why, in this superimposition, the conclusion of both thinkers diverts so much, with Girard calling for immediate action and Spengler falling to fatalism. Why does the latter give up in the face of this crisis, while the former, though equally pessimistic, believes that it is not too late? What is the overall difference in the view of these two thinkers, which in turn influences such opposing conclusions, and what, if anything, can Girard's brief foray into the philosophy of history tell us about what it is that provides him with that glimmer of hope?

Chapter 1: Finder of Things Hidden

Generation, regeneration, again, again, as in a ritual, with blood-stained vestments and nail-torn hands, children of Merlin, chasing a gleam. Children, too, of Eve, forever building Edens – and kicking them apart in berserk fury because somehow it isn't the same. (AGH! AGH! AGH! – an idiot screams his mindless anguish amid the rubble. But quickly! let it be inundated by the choir, chanting Alleluias at ninety decibels.)¹

Solomon, who in the Jewish tradition is considered the wisest man to ever live, stated, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” While this quote may seem liberating to some, in the sense that those who seek to pry open the secrets of the world can rest assured that all knowledge is contained therein, the saying also bears an ominous portent indicating that all world-historical events and their concurring consequences will resurface and reoccur, from the burgeoning forth of new cultures into history and, more importantly, their eventual death. In the wise words of Shirley Bassey, “It’s all just a little bit of history repeating.” The sinister inference included in quotes like these and their ilk – some more profound than others – is that while we may once again see new forms of cultural ornament and all its unique, successive stylings in the future, we will also witness, once again, the horrors of history which have, for the most part, left their impressions long after the collapse of a civilisation. What is perhaps less observed about these horrors are what could be considered *el momento de la verdad*,² which represent both the immediate cultural contemplation and execution of actions meant to circumvent a

¹ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 244.

² Moment of truth – This saying is derived from the Spanish sport of bullfighting and represents the moment in which the bullfighter both contemplates and executes his death-stroke.

destruction now becoming more and more self-perceptible to a culture. What this moment represents is the coming into contact of a culture or civilisation with what this dissertation will argue is an as yet inescapable crisis whose proportions envelop the entirety of a society. In fact, this dissertation will further argue that not only has this crisis recurred throughout history; it has always eventuated in the death of the civilisation upon whom it befalls. Furthermore, the argument will be made that this crisis is now descending upon the culture of the West which, by extension, has come to include large portions of the world.

This brings us back to the wisdom of Solomon. There is nothing new under the sun, and from Plato's Athenian democracy in crisis to Nietzsche's crisis of the death of God, the history of ideas on this subject (though never explicitly called a crisis) and reactions to it have run the gamut from an apathetic surrender to the winds of fate to a personal, individual overcoming of impending finality through the power of the Will. Despite these prescriptions, however, and despite millennia of intellectual labour dedicated to the subject, Solomon's simple yet fathoms-deep aphorism seems to have been vindicated through the passage of time and through the recurrence of historical crises of all kinds, not excluding what many perceive to be a crisis within our very own modernity. And while it may indeed be true that there is nothing new under the sun, the light of this same sun, through the work of one of the most exceptional thinkers of the past century uncovered a new truth which had hitherto remained "hidden since the foundation of the world": a theory that has allowed its adherents in the humanities to systematically re-engage and re-interpret many age-old philosophical problems, including that of crisis.

That thinker is René Girard, whose exceptional studies into literature, psychology and anthropology, amongst other disciplines, helped him to uncover what he believes to be the quintessential mechanism related to hominization and the subsequent development of cultures: mimesis. In relation to this concept and the idea of crisis, Girard plainly writes that

all crises, including our modern crisis are, essentially, a form of mimetic crisis – which in our era has become “mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale.”³ At first glance, this simple axiom seems extremely reductive, considering the complexity of the problems being dealt with; however, a greater understanding of Girard’s work will illuminate how the contrary is the case: his discovery of the mimetic mechanism has provided researchers with a new lens with which to reassess some of the oldest questions related to human history and the behaviour of cultures.

With this in mind, this chapter will be dedicated to trying to better understand this idea of crisis from the point of view of Girard’s mimetic theory. In doing so, it is the hope of the author that in using Girard’s methodology we can begin to look back and reassess some of the other thinkers who have immersed themselves in the study of historical cultural decline; in particular Oswald Spengler, whose work *The Decline of the West* is solely concerned with what this thesis considers the historical recurrence of multitudinous cultural crises and the subsequent civilizational decline which ensues. It is no wonder, then, that he has earned himself the nickname of “The Prophet of Doom.”

However, before we embark on our investigation of crises vis-à-vis Girard, a preliminary examination must be completed in order to fully understand Girard and his overall theory. While this analysis may be elementary, considering the breadth of his revelations, it will prepare us for the dialectic engagement mentioned above.

³ René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*. (Broadway; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 163.

The Darwin of the Humanities

*He fingered the mound of faggots where the wooden martyr stood. That's where all of us are standing now, he thought. On the fat kindling of past sins. And some of them are mine. Mine, Adam's, Herod's, Judas' ... mine. Everybody's. Always culminates in the colossus of the State, somehow, drawing about itself the mantle of godhood, being struck down by the wrath of heaven.*⁴

René Girard was born in 1923, in Avignon, France on Christmas Day⁵. Receiving his Baccalaureate in Philosophy in 1941, Girard then attended the Ecole des Chartres in Paris from 1943 to 1947 as an archiviste-paleographe – a specialist in medieval studies. In 1947 he moved to Indiana University and received his Ph.D. in 1950 after having written a dissertation topic concerning the “American Opinion of France, 1940-1943.”⁶ Girard, then held a position at Byrn Mawr for four years before accepting a position at John Hopkins University as an associate professor and achieving full professorship in 1961. It was during this time at John Hopkins University, while Girard worked on his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, in which a fundamental shift occurred in both his personal and academic thought that led to both a religious and intellectual conversion. In his first book, Girard remained within the then *de jour* academic context of literary analysis, with a specific focus on the workings of desire. By studying the novels of writers such as Cervantes, Proust and Dostoevsky (among others), Girard uncovered the first of the “two big things which concern him,”⁷ namely, “triangular” desire or what he termed “mimetic desire.”⁸

⁴ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 280.

⁵ William F. James, ed., *The Girard Reader*. (New York. Crossroad Publishing, 1996), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, vii.

⁸ James, *The Girard Reader*, 3.

He discovered in the works of these authors the *imitative* nature of desire; that our desires are not our own but, rather, are mobilised and duplicated based on the desired object of the other who, in turn, becomes the subject's mediator and model. Inevitably, if the subject imagines that the mediator has the object being desired, this leads to a rivalry between subject and model. Bubbio expands on this when he writes,

[...] *the preliminary stage of every subjective behaviour moves via a "third element"*

[...] The subject desires the object because the object is also desired by the rival: the rival is the subject's model on the plane of desire; and it is this mimetic desire that produces conflict.⁹

In the novelistic world, one examples of this is Don Quixote's desire towards chivalry mediated by his model, Amadis of Gaul, wherein "the disciple pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined by him, by the model of all chivalry [...] Chivalric existence is the *imitation* of Amadis in the same sense that the Christian's existence is the imitation of Christ."¹⁰

The concept of imitation as the defining characteristic of human behaviour was not new. Aristotle in his *Poetics* wrote: "Imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood (and in this they differ from other animals, i.e. in having a strong propensity to imitation and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation); so does the universal pleasure in imitation".¹¹ However, Girard's notion of desire *itself* as imitative revealed the romantic and predominant notion of the spontaneity of desire as illusory. Like any new discovery, this

⁹ Paolo Diego Bubbio, *Intellectual Sacrifice and Other Mimetic Paradoxes*. (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 3-4 [my italics].

¹⁰ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. (Baltimore; Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 2.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed., and trans., Malcolm Heath. (Penguin Classics, 1996), 6.

insight into the imitative nature of desire opened the floodgates, so to speak, for its application to other disciplines and this is precisely what Girard set out to do.

Girard began studying primitive religions from the new standpoint of his mimetic theory and in his second book, *Violence and the Sacred*, he found that the mimetic mechanism that he discovered in the great novels of the Western tradition was present in the practices of primitive religions and, more importantly, that the rivalries described above ended in collective violence against a single victim. This led to the second of his “big things,” namely, the *scapegoat*. I will here defer to *Evolution and Conversion* in order to explicate this theory:

In their slow evolutionary ascent, proto-humans ‘found’ in this mechanism a ‘tool’ for controlling the mimetic escalations of interspecific violence, when imitation (stronger in humans than in animals) diffuses dynamics of reciprocal contention and revenge in a given social group. Channelling collective violence and thrusting it upon a single individual, deeming him or her responsible for any crisis the group is undergoing (caused by scarcities, epidemics, infighting etc.) allows the community to keep systemic violence at bay, and to reconcile its members after the collective, unanimous expulsion of this random victim, who is perceived as the cause of the crisis, but who is actually a *scapegoat*, sacrificed to re-establish social equilibrium. This ‘pharmacological’ preconscious mechanism is so precious for the community itself that very often the victim, and his or her killing, become sacralised. Out of the ‘ritualisation’ of this proto-event (because imitation is also, but not exclusively, *repetition*) ... *all the processes of social structuring* emerge: taboos, norms, institutions, as well as the *mythical* recount of this ‘original’ event.¹²

¹² Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 6.

Here we have, via Girard's first works a contribution so momentous that a 1972 review of *Violence and the Sacred* in *Le Monde* stated that "the year 1972 should be marked with an asterisk in the annals of the humanities."¹³ Girard provided a theory which both reimagined desire not as an autonomous subjective phenomenon but also as an essentially imitative mechanism which, if left unabated, led to rivalry with others. In applying this theory to the study of primitive culture and recognising the escalation of rivalry into violence, along with the recognition of the ensuing communal murder of a sacrificial victim for the then incognisant purpose of fending off apocalyptic violence – in other words, using violence against one to combat violence between all – and the resulting, though misunderstood, catharsis experienced by the new society, Girard afforded the humanities a glimpse into the very origin of cultural beginnings. This, coupled with his assertion of a communal misunderstanding of the crisis and subsequent solution via the scapegoat, leading to a sacralisation of the dual figure that both brought on the crisis in life and ended it post-mortem, afforded what could be considered an even more impressive contribution to the intellectual sphere, that is, a wholly unique take on the beginnings of religion and the myths, taboos, prohibitions and rituals which accompany it.

But what Girard was offering was not primarily a theory of religion; instead, it was "a theory of human relations and of the role that the mechanism of victimage plays in those relations."¹⁴ Furthermore, there was the express invitation from Girard to interpret mimetic relations across the many disciplines dealing expressly with human relations when he said:

The situation of the interpreter who has the mimetic reading of human relations at his disposal is similar to that of the historian of science who is aware of the scientific

¹³ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁴ René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 44.

solution to a certain problem and who then considers the efforts of scientists in the past to solve it. The historian is capable of showing exactly at what point and for what reasons those who worked before the solution was found went astray in their research ... In the issue that concerns us any step toward a real solution changes the character of the problem.¹⁵

With this in mind, and Girard's theory of mimetic relations at hand, we can now begin our analysis of the major theme of this dissertation: the idea of crisis. If what has been missing from the academic canon has been this recognition of mimetic rivalry and the surrogate victim, perhaps one could make the bold assertion that our treatment of crises has hitherto been misinformed. We will attempt to contain our conversation within the sphere of philosophy – although there will be many diversions to other disciplines – as the *idea* of crisis, whilst encompassing the entirety of human affairs, is essentially a philosophic one. As reductive as Girard's theory may at first seem, we are now afforded the opportunity to delve far deeper into his twin theses and in so doing observe human relationships in light of this knowledge. To begin with, an examination of the individual will be required in order to set up an “echo structure” which will help us transpose the mimetic crisis of the individual into larger, dominant social structures and institutions from the metaphysical to the mundane. How, then, does the mimetic mechanism function on the individual, and how does this mechanism generate the subsequent crisis?

In the opening lines of *Intellectual Sacrifice and other Mimetic Paradoxes*, Bubbio writes that “The theoretical unity of René Girard's mimetic theory relies on the fundamental tenet that every person feels as though she or he is missing ‘something,’ a *being* with which others, by contrast, seem to be endowed by nature.”¹⁶ Bubbio is here leading us into a discussion of

¹⁵ Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁶ Bubbio, *Intellectual Sacrifice and other Mimetic Paradoxes*, 3.

the basic unit of Girard's mimetic mechanism mentioned above, that not only our desires but every subjective behaviour is 'mediated' by the other and their supposed possession, whether actual or not, of a desired object. Gil Bailie offers us a prime example of this behaviour that is observable as early as infancy.¹⁷

Let us for a moment imagine a scene of a small child sitting on her lonesome in a nursery scattered about with toys. In her untranslatable infant reveries, she shows only a passing, casual interest in the toys scattered about, randomly grabbing whichever is nearest to her immediate person. Suddenly, a second child is introduced to the scene. This new arrival is undoubtedly more interested, to begin with, in the first child; however, this curiosity is quickly rendered into a concern for the toy that the first child has shown some interest in. One can already foresee the impending confrontation. The second child, transfixed with the toy that the first child is investing her desire in, reaches for this self-same object whereat the first child suddenly and anxiously clings at the object she had heretofore treated with a rather bored indifference. This excessive reaction only further arouses in the second child the intensifying desire for the object that she had previously only absentmindedly reached for. What begins now is a magnification on each side of the need for ownership of the desired object and a concurrent magnification of rivalry with the perceived threat to said ownership. As we have seen here, "Desire is the product of *influence*, and in turn it has influence on others"; however, "the desired object is always located at the *confluence* of more than one desire."¹⁸ Furthermore, as Bailey clearly recognises, "... mimetic desire is *meta*-physical, not physical; it tends to become obsessional faster and more fiercely than merely physical desires – for which it would be more appropriate to use the term 'appetite,' rather than desire."¹⁹

¹⁷ Gil Bailie, *God's Gamble: The Gravitational Power of Crucified Love*. (Ranchos de Taos, NM: Angelico Press, 2016), 116-118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

During this rivalry an even stranger phenomenon begins to make itself clearly visible were one to witness the abovementioned nursery scene; let us return then for a moment to these two new rivals. Perhaps before any parents were able to step in, a dialogue between the two children may ensue in which both parties claim ownership of the item using identical language – the time-honoured playground classic, ‘I saw it first’.

What this parroting reveals is another strange dimension to mimetic rivalry that Girard had also observed: *internal mediation*.²⁰ The mimetic relationship above has now become intrinsically self-reinforcing, which, due to the “physical and psychological proximity of subject and model tends to become more and more symmetrical: the subject will tend to imitate his model as much as the model imitates him. Eventually, the subject will become the model of his model, just as the imitator will become the imitator of his imitator.”²¹ This internal mediation, which always aims at complete symmetry, at the paroxysm of the rivalry can do naught but produce *doubles*. When doubling occurs, the object of desire suddenly disappears in the midst of this rivalry, and the two undifferentiated antagonists become more concerned with defeating their opponent than with obtaining the object, which it seems was merely an excuse for the escalation of the dispute.²² Simply put, since mimetic desire is first and foremost metaphysical, “As the role of the *metaphysical* grows greater in desire, that of the *physical* diminishes in importance. As the mediator draws nearer, passion become more intense and the object is emptied of its concrete value.”²³ “Thus,” Girard writes, “a mimetic crisis is always a crisis of undifferentiation that erupts when the roles of subject and model are reduced to that of rivals. It’s the disappearance of the object which makes it possible. This

²⁰ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 85.

crisis not only escalates between the contenders, but it becomes contagious with bystanders.”²⁴

This contagion can be imagined in the nursery scene once again. Either child, at the peak of the rivalry, strikes the other and the respective parent rushes in to console but also to accuse. “What is wrong with your child?” says the one to the other, “She hit my kid!”. The other replies, “That’s because your child was teasing mine with the toy! She started it!”. One need only imagine the outcome of the scene. Back at home each of the parents relay the events at the nursery to their partner, which then begins a rivalry between opposing members of each family and so it goes on. This may seem quite a trite example of the mimetic mechanism in progress; however, as Bailie observes, “the dynamics operating in the innocuous little squabble [...] are the same dynamics – writ large – that operate in religious or ethnic or nationalistic conflicts.”²⁵ We will return to this extension of this dynamic to larger conflicts further below as it is the crux of our argument.

The question that arises when we survey an example as above, and the one which Girard perhaps spent most time elaborating on, is: what is desire? It was previously mentioned that Girard’s definition of desire was wholly unique and shattered previous notions of how desire functioned, as well as what this new understanding meant for human relations and human incentive. Above, Bailie was quoted as understanding that one must be cognisant that human desire – mimetic desire – is intrinsically separated from mere appetite. Bailie takes this hint from Girard himself when in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation Of The World* he writes,

We must not allow human desire to have the rather too absolute degree of specificity with which psychoanalysis still endows it; this is inimical to any form of scientific

²⁴ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 42.

²⁵ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*. (Crossroad Publishing. 1996), 117.

treatment. It is evident among animals that the effects of mimesis are grafted on to needs and appetites, though these never reach the same pitch as with human beings.

Desire is undoubtedly a distinctively human phenomenon that can only develop when a certain threshold of mimesis is transcended.²⁶

Girard warns us, however, that we must not simply take the view of either Freud or Hegel, who assert that a brink or verge has been crossed in regard to hominization and a new form of desire comparable to that around and within us has emerged. Rather, according to Girard's definition, mimesis must *not* interfere with animal instincts and appetites but with a biological mechanism that has been altered and modified by the movement of hominization itself: "the mimetic effects and a wholesale re-processing of symbols must develop in unison."²⁷ In fact, Girard makes the boisterous claim that this fundamental modification of this mechanism into his definition of mimetic desire is not only what makes us human but is what has allowed us to break away from our animal appetites and establish our own unique, though fickle, identities.²⁸

Already we can see an abrupt departure from the predominating psychological notion of human desire. Mimetic desire stands furthest away from the arch-individualistic modern, romantic definition that would have desire remain singular, unique and, in a way, predetermined. If desire simply belongs to oneself then one can continue desiring the same thing. Here the barrier between desire and mere instinct seems rather ineffectual. Girard understands that "in order to have *mobility* of desire – in relation to both appetites and instincts from one side and the social milieu from the other – the relevant difference is *imitation*; that is, the presence of the *model* or models, since everyone has one or more."²⁹ As

²⁶ Girard, *Things hidden since the foundation of the World*, 283.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁸ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

was seen by the example of the two children in the nursery, their desire was not a spontaneous, subjective choice but one that was mediated completely by a model who had infused an arbitrary item with heightened allure based on the perceived interest committed to it. This revelation about desire for individuals is sure to have greater repercussions regarding desire for the group, particularly when we take into account its contagious nature, for it is the contagion of desire that exacerbates a crisis which, at first, was limited to individuals and/or small rival groups. It is when we start to take into account the effect mimetic desire has on a burgeoning culture, for example, that we begin to see its far more insidious consequences and the way in which it has also, paradoxically, been that which Girard posits to be the “ur-scenario of human cultural origins and development.”³⁰

The Contagion

*I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look ... And I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats; and I'm a crow, especially when I stand a'top of this pine tree here.*³¹

When a mimetic rivalry between individuals escalates without interference from an authoritative-judicial power nor compromise through the introduction of the desired objects facsimile, the magnetic pull of the rivalry drags all those that come into contact with it into its contagious vortex, setting those who ally with the one side against those who have allied with the other. The *internal mediation* present in the conflict between individuals manifests itself into these group dynamics and functions similarly, essentially repeating the same phenomenon of *undifferentiation* leading to *doubling*. While both groups maintain the guilt of the other party and recognise in them the basis of their current quarrel, their accusatory gestures, their threats and their imputations all begin to symmetrically align, leading to the

³⁰ Ibid., 5

³¹ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or, The Whale*. (New York; New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 475.

complete mirroring of the one and the other.³² This is a very important point and one that will be returned to when analysing Spengler's analysis of recurrent conflictual patterns in cultural history. However, at this still preliminary stage we will continue to borrow from the hackneyed, if not effective, example of the nursery and its current stage of mimetic conflict.

The parents have returned home and, after having gathered the support of their spouses, begin to call some of their closest confidants accusing the other child, the quarrelling parent and the rest of her immediate family of every issue experienced thus far at the nursery, not merely this original and incidental altercation. Dark passions are brought to the surface and at the next meeting between the conflicting families palpable and manifest aggression makes itself clearly visible. Further families who are witnessing the spectacle are excitedly drawn in and, all at once, two makeshift "sides" are clearly definable.

The rivalry becomes exceedingly dangerous for those who are caught in its midst; however, at this stage, the nursery scene will fail to provide us with what we need to further expound on the real underlying phenomenon which lurks behind the mimetic mechanism. This discussion requires a look further back into the archaic, possibly pre-historic epoch of humankind. In the example of the nursery, "cultural constraints can channel it [mimetic aspects of desire] in constructive directions,"³³ and it is possible that, due to the pre-existing judicial systems, this rivalry could peter out and end in nothing more than hurt feelings and hidden resentments. Nevertheless, what if we were transported to a time prior to prohibitions, taboos and law? Or, to a time when prohibitions, taboos and law no longer work to keep

³² "As emotions arise, the opportunity for [...] compromise declines rapidly. Each [...] treats the suggestion that he take turns [...] as a betrayal by the one who makes it. If a perfect facsimile [...] is produced so that both [...] can have identical [items], the dispute may well sputter out, but each's interest in the no longer disputed [item] will in all likelihood begin to cool at the same time" Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 117.

³³ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. trans. Patrick Gregory. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 147.

mimetic desire in check? How would the above nursery situation play out when humankind stands on the threshold of animal and human?

The Event Horizon

*We all know what could happen, if there's war. The genetic festering is still with us from the last time Man tried to eradicate himself. Back then ... maybe they didn't know what would happen. Or perhaps they did know, but could not quite believe it until they tried it – like a child who knows what a loaded pistol is supposed to do, but who never pulled a trigger before.*³⁴

We return to the threshold where two sides undifferentiated from one another are engaged in a conflict with no cultural constraints to allow the rivalry to sputter out. Each accuses the other for the current contention and as the mimetic mechanism escalates in intensity and ferocity, it eventually leads to the disclosure and ultimate revealing of that which had thus far laid hidden within the mechanism of mimetic desire since the original individual conflict: violence. Were we to observe this point of the conflict from afar, violence would make itself manifest in one of two startling ways, with one leading to apocalyptic destruction, and the other to what Girard argues to be the very birth of culture. This, in essence, is his ur-scenario, the singular scenario that has been the testing ground, so to speak, of all human groups in their pre-cultural, social stages. As we develop our discussion around crisis in the succeeding chapter, this ur-scenario, in its later cultural re-emergence through the breakdown of institutions meant to hold it at bay, will be linked to the crisis of which this thesis argues is the emergent phenomenon in the contemporary socio-political milieu.

³⁴ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 275.

The former scenario, that of violence leading to apocalyptic destruction, can be easily perceived. This is the state of all against all wherein mimetic desire has reached its apex. In this state, with no way to dissipate the violent conflict, wholesale slaughter between both parties of a once cohesive band ensues. As Girard states, “Once, aroused, the urge to violence triggers certain physical changes that prepare men’s bodies for battle. This set toward violence lingers on; it should not be regarded as a simple reflex that ceases with the removal of the initial stimulus [...] it is more difficult to quell an impulse to violence than to rouse it.”³⁵ One could imagine a scenario here of “might being right” wherein the weak are slaughtered by the strong and, though the conflict may by its own volition and by virtue of the blood spilled begin to ebb, it could be said that by this stage the small group left can no longer be considered a group of any real consequence, whose fate it is to pass away forever unknown in the annals of history.

The above scenario, however, is one that is quite rare if one were to take into consideration the true nature of violence as described by Girard. Girard, suggests that “the physiology of violence varies little from one individual from another, *even from one culture to another*,”³⁶ and although the urge to violence and its insatiable nature once triggered are indeed essential parts of its physiology, there is another aspect of violence beyond this seeming irrationality which seems to point to an unconscious, fundamental rationality inherent within it. This austere aspect of violence, when unappeased, is that it always “seeks and always finds a surrogate victim”; it is not to be denied and therefore it can easily be diverted to another object.³⁷ We have ethological examples of this behaviour in various species; however, in humans this mechanism takes on a far different and symbolically

³⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 2.

³⁶ Ibid. [my italics]

³⁷ Ibid., 4.

pregnant function. What we are referencing here is human-willed sacrifice rather than the mere directionless overflowing of violent urges, and since “the entire institution of sacrifice is relegated by most modern theorists to the realm of imagination,”³⁸ the idea of a link between a supposedly irrational force such as violence and the act of sacrifice has been largely ignored. But the fact remains, for Girard, that this relationship is nothing new at all and has been analysed in a round-a-bout way as far back as the Greek tragedies.³⁹ Perhaps in today’s milieu it has become most difficult to understand the true nature of violence for myriad reasons to be unpacked further below; however, the prime reasons are the following: first, our denial of the contagious nature of desire and, by proxy, of violence; and second, and perhaps most importantly, the way that primitive humans, so rationally distinct from us, recognised violence in an almost entirely dehumanised form, that is, under the guise of the *sacred*.⁴⁰ This, here, becomes the crux of Girard’s momentous discovery – the sacred lurking within the act of violence:

The slightest outbreak of violence can bring about a catastrophic escalation [...]
Indeed, at times it is impossible to stay immune from the infection [...] There is no universal rule for quelling violence, no principle of guaranteed effectiveness [...]
Inevitably the moment comes when violence can only be countered by more violence [...]
The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man’s effort to master them. Tempest, forest fires, and plagues [...] may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in a far less obvious manner, stands human violence – violence seen as something

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁹ For example, Girard recognises this dynamic in *Bacchus*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

exterior to man and henceforth as part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.⁴¹

Since reciprocal and unquenchable violence can only be described as a vicious cycle contaminating everyone who comes into contact with it, the only way to avoid violence becoming apocalyptic is to escape from the cycle by the necessary means of removing “all those forms of violence that tend to become self-propagating and to spawn *new, imitative forms*.”⁴² Here, a surrogate victim is arbitrarily chosen,⁴³ separate yet similar to those from whom the victim is drawing away the violent impulses and, in the case of primitive societies,

When a community succeeds in convincing itself that one alone of its number is responsible for the violence mimesis besetting it; when it is able to view this member as the single “polluted” enemy who is contaminating the rest; and when the citizens are truly unanimous in this conviction – then the belief become a reality, for there will no longer exist elsewhere in the community a form of violence to be followed or opposed, which is to say, imitated and propagated.⁴⁴

The violence which has before this been orgiastic and all-consuming is directed towards this one surrogate victim and, more often than not, ends in their deliberate and violent murder at the hands of the collective, and it is here where the sacred nature of this murder makes itself most perceptible to the group of murderers through their ensuing actions and emotions.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² Ibid., 81. [my italics]

⁴³ Girard understands that this sacrificial process requires complete separation of the victim from whomever the victim is a substitute but also requires a similarity between both parties. This is in order so that the victim can draw the violent impulses to itself. If this fails, the violence will overflow its channels. For more on this see Chapter 2 of *Violence and the Sacred*.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 82.

The Mask of Violence

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!

*How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?*⁴⁵

The vines of desire grips two counterparts whose wants are directed toward an object imbued with an ever increasingly metaphysical attraction based on the subject/model dynamic – the triangle of desire, the ensuing internal mediation and the shifting of interest from the object to one another – creating rivals whose magnifying undifferentiation makes them doubles. The mimetic crisis and the ever-present violence inherent within it escalates, contagiously turning all witnesses into participants; one against one becomes all against all, the crisis reaches its absolute zenith, and the mimetic crisis becomes a sacrificial one. Either all destroy all, or, in that quaint, peculiar human fashion, some “reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask” and all against all becomes all against one: the *scapegoat* – what Girard called “unanimity minus one.”

The single victim is communally murdered and as inexplicably and suddenly as the crisis had begun, it ends. What follows after the murder, paradoxically, is reconciliation and catharsis resulting in the catalyst, for prehistoric humans, of higher culture. But how can this entire process be explained?

This shift from mimesis of the desired object to a mimesis of antagonism – a divisional mimesis to an affinitive mimesis – permits all alliances against a single victim; “the whole mechanism is contained in that shift.”⁴⁶ The victimary mimetic is triggered when mimetic

⁴⁵ Melville, *Moby Dick* or, *The Whale*, 178.

⁴⁶ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 48.

desire turns into mimetic rivalry. From this point, the mimetic rivalry, through its contagious nature, reaches social dimensions ultimately leading to “scapegoat polarisation and resolution, with a final mimetic reconciliation of the community.”⁴⁷ The mimetic rivalries, which may at first very well be separated, tend to contaminate each other more and more and become increasingly attractive as more rivals are included. The scapegoat mechanism ends with one greater snare consuming all others, therefore producing this singular victim. If all antagonisms are aimed towards the single victim, all reciprocal reprisals are therefore concluded, and thus the crisis comes to an end followed by communal peace and order. At no time does the community praise itself for the reconciliation; rather, “it regards this new acquisition of order as a gift from the victim just killed.”⁴⁸ Here the mask of violence, the sacred, slowly makes itself known. The victim is seen both as destructive, because they brought on the crisis and then, post-mortem, as benign, since their death restored peace. Therefore, “the scapegoat becomes divinised in the archaic sense, that is, the all-powerful, Almighty both for good and for bad simultaneously.”⁴⁹ Not only is this event the harbinger of peace and order; more importantly, this event is the seed of religious origination and belief around which prohibitions, taboos, laws and ritual are made manifest. The process of the victimary mechanism seen out to its end in the murder of the scapegoat, Girard realises, is the very process of hominization itself; our lonely step over the abyss from the world of the animal to the world of the human was facilitated by the heavily symbolically pregnant process of mimetic desire turned rivalry turned collective murder.

One may argue that this conclusion requires quite a leap of faith; however, as mimetic theory and other disciplines, such as ethology and animal behaviourism, more closely

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

converge over time, this theory seems more and more plausible. One may read the recent case from the *National Geographic* of a group of chimpanzees murdering and cannibalising their former leader.⁵⁰ While chimpanzees murdering other chimpanzees is quite a normal, observable behaviour, it is quite rare for researchers to witness chimpanzees killing others within their community although, granted, there are clear differences between researchers witnessing the event and the event taking place sans researchers. Nonetheless, what makes this case particularly interesting is that the competition (desire) for mates led to the ousting of the former leader of the group. While he wandered the outskirts of the group for many years, his presence seemed to harbour two opposing attitudes within the remaining community: those whom he continued to be friendly toward, and those who were punished by him. Sometime later, the researchers were shocked to find the body of the exiled leader, who had not only been murdered but whose body had been ravaged after his death. Again, this may seem quite elementary; however, it was what happened after the burial of the body by the researchers that was most surprising. “The remaining chimpanzees seemed to comfort each other, but also struggle with understanding what had happened. Through the night, nervous calls rang out over Fongoli, in the direction of the grave.”⁵¹ “They were still so afraid of the body [...]”⁵² Order had obviously been restored to the community yet this fascination with the grave and the nervous calls towards it that followed the burial – is this not in some dim way an analogue to the sacralisation of the victim? Could this very scene not have been played out somewhere in the far and distant past of the human evolutionary chain, a scene

⁵⁰ Michael Greshko “In Rare Killing, Chimpanzees Cannibalize Former Leader” *National Geographic*, January 30, 2017.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/01/chimpanzees-murder-cannibalism-senegal/>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² ISUNewsService. “ISU anthropologist witnesses rare, lethal aggression in African chimps.” YouTube Video, 1:17, February 1, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnhFCTGC4JM>

whose symbolism is so viscerally extreme that, over time, and with its repetition, it may have forced the leap to hominization of which Girard speaks?

Religion: Prohibitions, Taboos and The Ritual

Desecrated as the body is, a vengeful ghost survives and hovers over it to scare. Espied by some timid man-of-war or blundering discovery-vessel from afar, when the distance obscuring the swarming fowls, nevertheless still shows the white mass floating in the sun, and the white spray heaving high against it; straightway the whale's unharming corpse, with trembling fingers is set down in the log - shoals, rocks, and breakers hereabout: beware! And for years afterwards, perhaps, ships shun the place; leaping over it as silly sheep leap over a vacuum, because their leader originally leaped there when a stick was held. There's your law of precedents; there's your utility of traditions; there's the story of your obstinate survival of old beliefs never bottomed on the earth, and now not even hovering in the air! There's orthodoxy!

Thus, while in the life the great whale's body may have been a real terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a powerless panic to a world. Are you a believer in ghosts, my friend? There are other ghosts than the Cock-Lane one, and far deeper men than Doctor Johnson who believe in them.⁵³

While the death of the original victim has restored order and brought peace to the burgeoning community, mimetic desire, as an intrinsic part of what makes us human, is ever present and, were its violent flames to be stoked by possible rivalry, has the ability to once again throw the community into a similar scenario of mimetic chaos. With the divinity of the original victim sanctified, in order to keep desire and its deleterious effects at bay,

⁵³ Melville, *Moby Dick* or, *The Whale*, 336-337.

prohibitions and taboos are put in place, each with the aim of hindering the possibility of mimetic conflict between those of a community. Girard writes,

How are we to imagine the birth of cultural prohibitions? It must be thought of concurrently with all other cultural births. The divine epiphany, the universal upsurge of the monstrous doubles engulfs the community and simultaneously makes its presence felt at all points of conflict ... Whatever the pretext for the conflict may have been – food, weapons, land, women – the antagonists suspend their struggle, now and forever. Hence forth everything touched by the sacred violence belongs to the gods; as such, it becomes the object of a most solemn prohibition. The antagonists have been sobered and thoroughly frightened. From now on they will do everything possible to keep from relapsing into reciprocal violence. Moreover, divine anger has taught them that preventive measures are necessary. Wherever violence occurs, a prohibition is proclaimed.⁵⁴

The purpose of these prohibitions is to halt or minimise the tendency to imitative behaviour with some archaic societies going so far as prohibiting one member from copying the gesture of another within the community.⁵⁵ In this way, Girard suggests, primitive humans understood the relation between mimesis and violence far better than we do. Why this is so will be explicated further below.

Despite these prohibitions and taboos, the intensifying nature of mimetic desire nevertheless manages to prove a continuous threat, and it is at this stage that ritual steps in where prohibitions fail. When undeterred by prohibitions and taboos, mimetic desire influences individuals or small groups and sets into motion the impending crisis roughly

⁵⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 219.

⁵⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 10.

outlined above. Here a strange turn takes place where the concern becomes not one of avoiding the mimetic crisis, but of reproducing it.⁵⁶ “If prohibition provides a rough sketch of the crisis,” writes Girard, “ritual places it sharply in relief. There can be no doubt that the mimetic crisis bedevils all of religious thought. In fact ... there are few myths that, when given a more complete description, do not make at least some allusion to it.”⁵⁷ In rituals, as distinct from anti-mimetic prohibitions, the mimetic crisis is essentially re-enacted through a violation of all prohibitions.

These were periods in which the ordinary order of things was inverted, or “the world was turned upside down.” For a while, there was a ludic interval, in which people played out a condition of reversal of the usual order. Boys wore the mitre, or fools were made kings for a day; what was ordinarily revered was mocked, people permitted themselves various forms of license, not just sexually but *also in close-to-violent acts*, and the like.⁵⁸

Charles Taylor in his *A Secular Age* describes these “feasts of misrule” or “carnivals” as anti-structure to the normally prohibitive structure of society.⁵⁹ Taylor correctly recognises these carnivals as “steam-release valves.” However, while he understands their effect as socially rejuvenating, he does not recognise the key point to these feasts of misrule as Girard does; that is, that the common denominator between prohibitions and ritual are the same – namely, mimetic conflict, and ritual attempts to reproduce what prohibitions aim to keep at bay. These societies, under the immense pressure of the impending mimetic conflict, abandon themselves, in their rituals, to what they fear most during normal periods: the dissolution of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 46 [my italics].

⁵⁹ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 45 [my italics].

the community in the mimetic crisis,⁶⁰ and just as the victimage mechanism arises at the paroxysm of the original crisis, so do these ritual re-enactments at their apex seek to conclude this carnival with the immolation of an animal or human victim. Here, again, we have the origins of sacrifice in the name of religion. For what is most peculiar about the sacrifice, especially the murder of the original scapegoat, is that Girard essentially labels its effect as pharmacological.⁶¹

With the original murder having been committed unanimously, the joyous and soothing cathartic effect that ensues is analogous to the effects of a drug to treat, say, chronic pain. However, while the pain may subside and while, temporarily, life may resume normally, eventually, once the effects of the drug wear off, so too does the pain return. In the same way, the power of the original murder to bind the community and ingrain social obedience to prohibitions also wanes and, ultimately, the mimetic mechanism once again requires ritual sacrifice in order for its pharmacological effects to be refreshed. Viewed in this way, ritual essentially becomes an unconscious dramatization: a remembrance of the original crisis and sacrificial conclusion that brought the community together in the guise of a functioning, burgeoning culture. Whilst in some cases, as with Mesopotamian cultures, this ritual re-enactment may literally end with the sacrifice of a human victim, “the conclusion of a ritual might be limited to ritual mutilation or exorcism”; but, most importantly, “these are always equivalent of sacrifice.”⁶² As against the mythical Freudian assumption that a group gathers to destroy any sort of victim due to the commemoration of some guilt still cognisable from pre-history,⁶³ Girard emphatically states that “what is not purely mythical [...] is the idea that

⁶⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 22.

⁶¹ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 6.

⁶² Girard, *Things hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 23.

⁶³ “Freud does a poor job of situating this murder, by the way, when he places it at the beginning of the ritual sequence ... The idea that a group would gather to immolate any sort

men would immolate victims because an original, spontaneous murder had in fact unified the community and put an end to a real mimetic crisis. In this light, ritual becomes comprehensible as an attempt to avert the *real threat of crisis*; the crisis would be reproduced not for its own sake but for the sake of its resolution.”⁶⁴ With this in mind it becomes quite clear that the religion which overhangs the fulfilment of ritual is nothing more than the abovementioned effort to “keep the peace”:⁶⁵ “*The sacred is violence*, but if religious man worships violence it is only insofar as the worship of violence is supposed to bring peace; religion is entirely concerned with peace, but the means it has of bringing it about are never free of sacrificial violence.”⁶⁶ Girard has introduced an extremely jarring picture of how not only cultures but also the religions born therein have been predicated on sacrificial violence latent in the mimetic mechanism so essential to human flourishing and ingenuity. Rather than Rousseau’s noble savages and a succession of peaceful cultural origins to follow, the process of hominization and social arrangement seems to be nothing more than a Hobbesian nightmare.

At first glance it could be assumed that Girard is uncharitable to the entire human endeavour thus far; however, this couldn’t be further from the case, for Girard understands that underlying this entire process of cultural beginnings and religious/mythical origins based on sacred violence is a fundamental misunderstanding of the process in and of itself by those who have thus far relied on this mechanism. This *unconscious* misunderstanding is that which requires further explication to better understand how the Girardian oeuvre can provide a fresh explanation of previous and contemporary crises.

of victim in order to commemorate the ‘guilt’ they still feel for a prehistoric murder is purely mythical.” Ibid., 25.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The Misrecognition

*Ask for an omen, then stone it when it comes – de essentia hominum.*⁶⁷

What we have seen so far, in brief, is the way in which acquisitive mimesis, or mimetic desire, is on the one hand the originator of inter-group rivalry and, on the other, that which leads to the sacrificial crisis which is the basis of not only cultural beginnings but, accordingly, of hominization itself. We have also seen that in the entire scenario leading up to, and of, the mimetic crisis, there seems to be a hidden logic always directed towards its own resolution, one that turns possibly destructive violence into a mechanism for cultural stability and catharsis. If this seems radical and even nonsensical to us in our modern, enlightened world, it is easy to imagine the awe and bewilderment with which prehistoric humans would have attempted to digest the symbolically significant act that they were a party to. Crossing the chasm from pre-homo-sapiens to homo-sapiens, from what Bataille called ‘water in water’ to higher cultural structures and rich symbolic representation would have been naught but a system shock analogous to a newborn emerging from the womb. Some schools of thought, like that of the German Idealists, place little to no importance on the pre-historical state of humans and the cultural foundations laid in those embryonic stages, focusing instead on the emergence of human reason out of the darkness of animal irrationality; however, what Girard has discovered occurring in these embryonic stages is what the proceeding cultural structures are built on. We will return to this historical dichotomy further below. For our immediate purpose it is necessary to understand that it is during this extremely jarring formative experience that what Girard emphasises is not an understanding of what has occurred but, conversely, a misunderstanding and misrecognition. This originary transition is the source, says Girard, of an incomprehension and even a

⁶⁷ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 287.

deception which is built into every form of representation. Girard uses the Lacanian term of *meconnaissance*, and his intention is to communicate how it is only through an unconscious or preconscious *refusal* of the knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism and one's own complicity in it that renders it truly effective in its dynamic cultural creation. The *double transference* mentioned above – wherein “those involved in the collective violence transfer the disorder and the offenses producing it to the victim, but they transfer their newly found peace to the victim ascribing to him or her the power that brings it about”⁶⁸ – casts such a powerful spell on those who have participated in and witnessed the original violent outbreak and subsequent period of peace before and after the death of the ambivalent victim that in the refractory period, so to speak, and in the symbolically suggestive mind of the group rescued from destruction, this sequence of events could only be understood as the work of a god.

According to Girard, along with the prohibitions, taboos and rituals, and perhaps even prior to these, a myth is born from the paradigm-shifting incident, which reinterprets and revived the course of events, presenting them in sacred symbols and language whilst unconsciously veiling the sacred violence beneath it all. In Girard's scheme, it is the externalisation of the violence coupled with the delusions that one has no complicity in it, due to its divine origins, which allows for this misrecognition of the agency of personally inflicted violence. The myth, in a sense, is the unguent that binds the prohibitions, taboos and rituals to the original event and acts as the barrier to a true recognition of the events that now exist behind a cloak of mythological representations. “The root of the Greek word for myth, *muthos*” writes Bailie, “is *mu*, which means ‘to close’ or ‘keep secret.’ *Muo* means to close one's eyes or mouth, to mute the voice, or to remain mute. Myth remembers discretely and

⁶⁸ James, *The Girard Reader*, 69.

selectively,”⁶⁹ and in a very real and dangerous way this misrecognition, once seeded and sprouted, remains even once the myth that bound it to its cultural manifestations dissipates.

To gain further insight into this hunch, Girard read Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and was amazed to find the common theme between most, if not all myth, was the arrival, death and resurrection of a divine king lending far more credence to his ur-scenario and the events that follow from it. This original and continuous misrecognition, now bolstered by myth, is further fostered by the now theological basis of the sacrifice and the god who alone demands the victims and savours the smoke from the altars.⁷⁰

What, then, is Girard saying about the birth of cultures and institutions? Essentially, and unapologetically, Girard asserts that real institutions have been and continue to be constructed on a purely illusory basis,⁷¹ and, furthermore, that the misrecognition which leads to the illusion has been a necessity to ensure human survival in its earliest stages. And survive we have. However, if the crisis is an ever present threat, if prohibitions and ritual fail in dispersing or concentrating the mimetic mechanism respectively, if the pharmacological effects of sacrifice no longer provide the cathartic resolution, if sacred violence is no longer able to be withheld, how did we not only manage to survive but thrive into the technologically superior and relatively comfortable and peaceful contemporary period of modernity? Why, instead of chaos, do we have order?

⁶⁹ Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 33.

⁷⁰ James, *The Girard Reader*, 76.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

Bellum omnium contra omnes

*Bombs and tantrums, when the world grew bitter because the world fell somehow short of half-remembered Eden ... But bombs and tantrums. They don't forgive*⁷²

In Girard's psychology, metaphysical desire and the internal mediation that follows creates rivalry that leads to violence. Left unchecked, this scenario becomes the Hobbesian war of all against all. Earlier philosophies, particularly those of the eighteenth century, such as Rousseau's, asserted that this was avoided due to an adherence to the social contract; that peace in a society is the favourable and most propitious human state one strives for.⁷³ It seems, however, that the twentieth century and the terrible events that unfolded are a historical counterview to these optimistic philosophies. Girard provides us with a more sober hypothesis in the view of these atrocities and understands that violence is not and cannot be eliminated in societies that reach a cultural stage beyond the pastoral. Certainly, there are those human groups that never reach even this preliminary stage due to the inability of the victimage mechanism to disclose itself, or, if it does disclose itself, the sacrifice does not to function in a way conducive to catharsis and social cohesion.⁷⁴ Violence is the constant danger, threatening to plunge the society into self-destruction. It is not a social contract that keeps this at bay, for the seeking nature of mimetic desire means that, due to its internal character, it is always seeking the object of a model and soon to be rival. Rather, Girard understands that it is not a utopian notion of peace written into our *spiritus mundi* which

⁷² Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 328.

⁷³ Susan Dunn, "Introduction: Rousseau's Political Triptych" in *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn, 1-36. (Binghamton: New York. Vail-Ballou Press, 2002), 7.

⁷⁴ Girard explains that for the sacrifice to fulfil its proper role in this stage of cultural origination, the victim themselves must, in a sense, tick all the boxes of an unconscious checklist. There is a dual requirement necessary. The first is the requirement that the sacrificed victim is to be completely separated from those beings for whom the victim is the substitute. The second is that there remains a similarity between both parties. (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 39).

rescues us from violence but, paradoxically, violence itself. For the entire mechanism of the surrogate victim, born from mimetic rivalry, is to use a *lesser* violence; the sacrifice of one to combat a *greater* violence – the destruction of all. The psychology of vengeance, particularly violent vengeance, considering the reciprocal impulse of violence discussed above, is a stark reality that has the very real possibility of destroying all within a community. In order to curb this impulse to vengeance, then, it was necessary that the direction of violence was channelled towards an object that could not retaliate with violence of its own, namely, the surrogate victim. The surrogate victim, during the sacrificial crisis, acts as a substitute for the community, a conduit for the mimetic contagion and its violence; a substitute on whom the entirety of violent energy can be channelled and diffused without fear of reprisal. Here, there seems again a logic at work this time aimed at the taming of violence or, rather, the choice of harnessing “good” or “evil” violence.⁷⁵ In essence, the culture which is born from this ur-scenario⁷⁶ and the subsequent prohibitions and rituals are not merely a mechanism with which to try and avoid occasions of imitative behaviour/desire, but also a means of delicately controlling violence by the use of its supposedly “benign” qualities consisting of the pharmacological, cathartic release produced by the immolation of a substitutive victim.⁷⁷ According to Girard, every ritual sacrifice subsequent to the original murder is a substitute of a substitute, and each murder of the substitute, whether it is at this stage still human or a like analogue, is an offering to a god, which is nothing more than violence sacralised. In this sense, then, all cultural manifestations which are the progeny of a culture’s particular myth and whose business it is to ensure its propagation and adherence are merely a means with which to control and subdue a violence which at any time may become calamitous; it is a

⁷⁵ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*. (Baltimore; Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 43.

⁷⁶ Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

devotion to “good” violence in order to arrest “bad” violence.⁷⁸ Seen in this way, culture has been the worship of violence, if only a particular understanding of it, and an attempt at harnessing it for the sake of communal prosperity. This is the illusory nature upon which cultures and greater social structures have been built and, if anything, this is the social contract to which we are bound – to continue to misrecognise our role and personal agency in this schema and to ward off all “bad” violence at the cost of a substitute for the sake of continued harmony. Even so, as mentioned above, this entire operation remains pharmacological, and the harmony is ever tenuous. The harmony bought by violence remains ethereal, and the doses required in order to maintain harmony continuously increase. Both Girard and Bailie lean on the Aztec culture as a definitive example of this kind of phenomenon in action, relating how the worship of Tezcatlipoca, in its early stages and in memory of his original stoning, required “only” one human sacrifice annually after a year-long ritual involving the transformation of a captured slave into a king. The yearly murder of this slave turned substitute deity had enough symbolic and representational power to stave off the violent overflow brought on by the mimetic contagions. However, when this same culture was in its decline, it was reported that during a four-day celebration any number between 10,000 to 80,000 people had been sacrificed.⁷⁹ The use of the term *pharmacological* was not merely expressive of the effect that the sacrifice has; Girard understood its etymological significance in its relation to the ancient Greek notion of *Pharmakos*, a word that meant the victim of sacrificial, scapegoat violence. “The Greek word *pharmakon*, from which we get ‘pharmacy’ and its cognates,” writes Bailie, “means both ‘medicine’ and ‘poison’. Sacrificial

⁷⁸ “Ritual is a cultural form that prepares for the sacrificial resolution, but it serves mainly as a form of controlling violence, and the increasing sophistication of ritualistic forms and elements helps in distancing further and further a given culture from the original violence implicit in the ritualistic act.” *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁹ Scott Rank, “Aztec Culture: How Many were Killed as Human Sacrifices?” *History on the Net*, Salem Media. October 6, 2020.

rituals that cure the social realm of its tensions under certain circumstances, can poison it under other circumstances. More to the point, if a sacrificial event fails to function as a cure, it will inevitably function as a poison [...].”⁸⁰ In Girard’s own words, the sacrificial crisis must “cure the body politic either instantly or not at all,”⁸¹ and when it fails to provide the cure it had once provided, violence, this time without its sacred aura, has the chance to reappear and plunge the society into chaos. This is the age-old gambit on which humanity has wagered its survival in view of the sacred: “to privilege one form of violence, and to confer upon it such transcendent prestige, that a profane imitation of it becomes unthinkable.”⁸² Since this solution is culturally and, as it were, biologically ingrained, upon the resurgence of succeeding mimetic crises violence once again becomes that to which the culture looks in order to achieve its cathartic resolution; however, as camaraderie and moral rectitude are not forthcoming, new and existing rivalries fester and the social fabric begins to fall apart; “cultural violence that does not climax in *catharsis* will result in *mimesis*.”⁸³ At this stage, sacred violence becomes vulgar violence, and rivalries, with their magnetic pull, threaten to destroy the community in the way that the violence of the original mimetic scenario did. Depending on the complexity of the culture, its social arrangements and its institutions, this reinvigorated pull to violence will either destroy the culture or, more likely, be subsumed into the authoritative strata already constructed in a continued attempt to keep it at bay. Bailie writes: “It has been humanity’s recurrent dream that it would eventually be able to [...] come to its senses. For ten thousand years it has been trying to do so by countering wild and primitive ‘violence’ with stately and authorised ‘force’.”⁸⁴ Mundane authorities replace the

⁸⁰ Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 86.

⁸¹ René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. (Chicago: Illinois. St. Augustine’s Press, 2004), 220.

⁸² Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 86.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

profane and these institutions continue the tradition of championing ‘good’ force over ‘bad’ or ‘criminal’ violence: Hobbes’ Leviathan is born. What Hobbes never imagined though is that the mundane hold on violence still leans heavily on its sacrificial origins. Righteous violence against criminals becomes fascinating to its onlookers the same way ancient ritual killings were. Whether through hangings, war, or any other modern form of violent voyeurism, should the fascination reach climax, catharsis can still occur; however, should it not, then the spectacle of violence becomes a mere model for similar violence for those spectators most entranced by it. The original illusion eluded to by Girard remains, and the mimetic mechanism and its related violence, though shorn from its original ritualistic connotations, continues to be that which both cures and poisons through its reversion to the sacrificial mechanism.

While how this functions in modernity will be looked at in far greater detail further below through our analysis of Spengler and other thinkers, at this preliminary stage of the investigation it is my hope that this underlying mechanism, wrought from mimetic desire and fashioned through violence, its misrecognition and the illusion around which society is constructed, be ever present in the reader’s mind. Though the above examination seems to be applicable only to anthropology, Girard’s theory was such a stroke of genius that it can and must be applied to other disciplines. As we have investigated through the notion of meconnaissance and its illusions, the mimetic mechanism and its functionaries work in far more insidious ways, not only influencing human practice, but human thought and reason itself. There lives in this mechanism an underlying, perhaps preconscious rationale which, through its ability to remain shrouded, has possibly affected higher, instrumental reason from its awakening. This, in relation to the philosopher who will be examined below, will continue the conversation where this chapter leaves it.

Chapter 2: Schoolteacher turned Soothsayer

We are the centuries. We are the chin-choppers and the golly-woppers, and soon we shall discuss the amputation of your head ... Wir, as they say in the old country, marschieren weiter wenn alles in Scherben fällt. We have your eoliths and your mesoliths and your neoliths. We have your Babylons and your Pompeiis, your Caesars and your chromium-plated (vital-ingredient-impregnated) artifacts. We have your bloody hatchets and your Hiroshimas. We march in spite of Hell, we do. We bury your dead and their reputations. We bury you. We are the centuries. Be born then, gasp wind, screech at the surgeon's slap, seek manhood, taste a little godhood, feel pain, give birth, struggle a little while, succumb:

(Dying, leave quietly by the rear exit, please.)¹

In the last chapter I explored in brief the basic tenets of René Girard's thought. I examined how his radical observations on great literature and, later, anthropology, opened the doors to view disciplines in the humanities in a unique way, inviting scholars to apply his conception of mimetic nature and the victimage mechanism to their own field of study. As mentioned, this invitation is open to many disciplines and acts as a focal point for the revision and rethinking of modern ideas that have, perhaps, remained intellectually static. One of the main disciplines affected by Girard's breakthrough is the study of cultural history. For it was Girard's explicit study and treatment of these branches of knowledge, along with his analysis of literature, that bore for him the most intellectually justifiable fruit. I have earlier stated that I aim to accept Girard's invitation to view the world through the lens of the mimetic mechanism he discovered and in so doing reassess and remodel, *grosso modo*, existing

¹ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 244.

theories which, either through ignorance of or disregard towards, have failed to take into account his view of imitative desire and the consequent cultural and social machination convoked to deal with it. Doing so, then, requires in some measure a clashing with or polemic against certain philosophies as Girard is clear in his assertion that the intellectual undertaking he has proposed will inevitably call for just such a confrontation. In fact, as mentioned in the previous chapter, when we delve far deeper into Girard's premises we find that his theories concerning myth and its mystification of human violence extend beyond the physical and into the metaphysical world, right into the very heart of thought itself.² It is especially in the realm of human thought and its manifestation through philosophy that we see an analogue of the mystification of human violence that myth provides a culture post-sacrificial crisis; however, in this case, philosophy applies an intellectual symbolism that borrows from the same mechanism to expel its own surrogate victim, namely, religion. On this point we will return in far greater detail; however, it has been mentioned here as a means to guide us to the true destination of this particular chapter, which will act as an approximate exemplification of the above point. If especially historical anthropology and philosophy have hitherto remained naïve or uninitiated to the mechanisms that Girard considers fundamental to human development, both cultural and intellectual, it is requisite to analyse a philosophy that entertains at formulating a theory focused precisely on the workings of history, namely, a philosophy of history.

An additional motivation for pursuing this discipline also lies in the possibility it provides in examining the historical recurrence of cultural crises and the possible meanings therein. It is to Girard's credit that his discoveries are by no means meant to act as a substitute for existing theories or, worse yet, to expel them; rather, he is quick to emphasise that the discoveries have co-existed laterally with humanity since the foundation of the world.

² See Bubbio, *Intellectual Sacrifice and Other Mimetic Paradoxes*. 12

Instead, the ideas in his theses, which he is adamant are not his ideas but merely an enduring phenomenon he was fortunate enough to have identified and penned, are meant to serve as a ballast to those theories which for him act as conduits of truth; in his case, truth being that which unveils and dismantles the workings of mimetic desire, rather than agents of mystification intent on furthering the lies inherent in a reliance on the mechanisms of mimesis and its various manifestations. In fact, his theories act in the manner of the *argumentum a fortiori*, in which newer, stronger conclusions about existing convictions arise when the implicit existence of the former in the latter becomes evidential through its reinterpretation and reanalysis. The effect of this, whose details will be our later focus, is multifarious yet decidedly limited when arriving at a conclusion regarding whether or not a philosophy is aligned with Girard's truth in the sense that he sees it; either it continues its reliance on mystification through an intellectual symbolism that expels or persecutes, or it aligns itself with a logos aimed at a demystification which exposes the agency cloaking itself within the structures of symbolism.

With this disclaimer in mind, as I move forward in my analyses, I will aim to apply Girard's reasoning *ex post facto* to Spengler's work in order not only to recognize both Spengler's prophetic acumen, but also his errors when compared to Girardian precepts. This in turn will lead into a discussion on *crisis*, a phenomenon both writers deal with in detail from their respective points of view.

We will see, again, their complementarity and their deviations, which will serve as an analogue for a macro analysis of reason for why such divergent opinions on crisis may or may not exist. It may seem at first that the choice of Oswald Spengler is dubious in an academic climate which has, for the most part, relegated Spengler to the dustbin of historical pseudoscience – particularly when standing on the shoulders of such giants as Hegel, Kant and Karl Marx, who had formulated more plausible historical scenarios with far more

academic rigour. But the fact remains that in an endeavour that aims to postulate the movement of historical sequences and the directions they will take, the greatest judge of a theory's virtue remains history itself – and, in the case of Spengler, his conjectures and predictions seem to have been vindicated by the movement of time since the writing of his seminal *Decline of the West*, a claim supported by such prominent thinkers as Theodor Adorno half a century after its writing.³ In addition to this, *Decline of the West* and those influenced by its writing, most notably Julius Evola, have experienced a resurgence outside of the confines of academia. Alarming, perhaps, Spengler has become a kind of philosopher mascot for a political position which has been labelled as the Alt-Right⁴, or Alternative Right, a movement which has continued to gain prominent media exposure throughout the 2016 presidential primaries and subsequent first-term of the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump. While there is no official hierarchy or spokesman for the Alt-Right, among the loosely defined political subset there is a somewhat general consensus that their philosophy

... draws from the same major intellectuals from the Old World as the so-called New Right on that continent in an attempt to synthesize their thought as a way out from the decadent ideology of Liberalism. These are Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, along with thinkers of the interwar Conservative Revolution in Germany, such as Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, and Thomas Mann, among others. Of particular interest are Spenglerian theory of civilizational decline, Nietzschean emphasis on aesthetics and temporal cycles of eternal return, and Schmittian concept of the Political.⁵

³ Adorno, “Was Spengler Right?”

⁴ John Undonne “What is the Alt-Right?” *Katehon*, January 27, 2017. <https://katehon.com/en/article/what-alt-right>

⁵ Ibid.

While trying to distance itself from its obvious National Socialist influences, the Alt-Right⁶ has nonetheless been reported to consist of “white nationalists, neo-monarchists, masculinists, conspiracists, belligerent nihilists and social media trolls.”⁷ In fact, this so-called loose and ill-defined subset of “social media trolls” were so ornery and militant during the 2016 presidential race that many in the media believe that it was through their overwhelming internet presence that they, in essence, won Donald Trump the presidency of the most powerful nation on Earth.⁸

While there are no definitive reasons as to why Spengler’s writings may have had such a magnetic pull on this particular group, it may well be that in the thesis expounded in *The Decline of the West* there resided the justification required for wayward individuals to align themselves with this particular ideology. It can be argued that this alignment with Spengler is not so much due to an intellectual conversion through a close study of his work but to the fact that the very aesthetic of Spengler’s work coincides with the overall aesthetic of the alt-right, that is, images of social decay and impending doom which seem to be one of the uniting themes of their ideology.⁹ However, to better understand this pull of Spengler’s on a

⁶There is, naturally, much more to the Alt-Right than what is briefly presented in this quote; however, for the sake of the discussion at hand I will concentrate primarily on their reliance on Spengler’s thought and its influence on their philosophy. For a deeper discussion of the alt-right contemporary with the 2016 presidential race, see Jane Goodall. “Keeping Calm in the Face of the Alt-Right”. Podcast. *PolitiScope*. 2017.

<https://www.spreaker.com/user/auspollive/keeping-calm-in-the-face-of-the-alt-right>

⁷ Andrew Marantz, “Trolls for Trump”. *The New Yorker*. October 24, 2016.

⁸ See, for example, Jesse Singal, “How Internet Trolls Won the 2016 Presidential election” *New York Magazine*. September 16, 2016. <http://nymag.com/selectall/2016/09/how-internet-trolls-won-the-2016-presidential-election.html> or Ben Schreckinger, “World War Meme” *Politico Magazine*. March/April, 2017.

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/memes-4chan-trump-supporters-trolls-internet-214856>

⁹ See Steven Bannon’s documentary (SteveBannon2017. “Generation Zero Documentary”. YouTube video. 1:20:35. November 23, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4OnIPbNCG0>) to see an early version of this aesthetic. As one can see from its viewing the first minute already has images of atomic explosions, the rising US debt clock, a circling shark fin and burning money. In 2017, Visual Artist Jonas

politically disenfranchised generation, we must first understand the finer points of Spengler's theories in which he deals with what he believes to be the crisis of Western civilisation which will lead to its eventual downfall and how, in an impressive expression of irony, these self-same modern adherents of his are part of the very phenomena he describes when defining cultural decline – an important point which will receive far more subsequent attention. Additionally, how Spengler aims to formulate a solution to his crisis is, from Girard's point of view, a historically episodic dead-end: the philosophy advising Spengler's prescription is one which – perhaps unbeknownst to him in light of his ignorance to mimetic principles – has itself been cause for the modern decline he so vigorously preaches.

The Prophet of Doom: Oswald Spengler

*Come, Ahab's compliments to ye; come and see if ye can swerve me. Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! Man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!*¹⁰

Spengler aimed to understand the fundamental mechanics of culture: its motivations for growth, the nature of its aesthetics, its socio-political evolutions and revolutions, its metaphysical and mythical *Weltanschauung* and, perhaps most importantly, the historically recurrent maturation and eventual decline of the select “High-Cultures,” as he termed them. Spengler, writing in what he perceived to be culturally decadent years of the Weimar period, saw in his own milieu analogues of former historical periods of debasement, each acting as a

Staal curated an exhibition that also studied the aesthetic of the Alt-Right and its reliance on apocalyptic imagery. (“Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective. An exhibition project by Jonas Staal”. *Het Nieuwe Instituut*. Accessed April 23, 2019. <https://steve-bannon-propaganda-retrospective.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/>)

¹⁰ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 183.

signpost for impending decline and the eventual collapse of a society. But to best understand the analogies Spengler tried to make, we must first understand Spengler and his placement in history.

Oswald Spengler, a German gymnasium teacher, captured the intellectual imagination of his fellow countrymen when, in 1918, he released *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, popularly translated into English as *The Decline of the West*. Within the first eight years of its release, the original German edition sold 100,000 copies,¹¹ a number almost unheard of at the time for a novel let alone a work of philosophical historicism. A 1928 *Time* magazine review of the second volume released in 1923 described the immensely positive reaction to Spengler's work:

When the first volume of *The Decline of the West* appeared in Germany a few years ago, thousands of copies were sold. Cultivated European discourse quickly became Spengler-saturated. Spenglerism spurted from the pens of countless disciples. It was imperative to read Spengler, to sympathize or revolt. It still remains so.¹²

This last sentence, "it still remains so," while written in 1928, is perhaps now more relevant than ever. While choice quotes from theories have captured and gained a stronghold in the imagination of an entire sub-group of a generation, his theses are increasingly being revisited and re-examined in scholarly and popular literature on the face of his seemingly accurate predictions over the last century, with the popularity and subsequent election of a dictatorial, Caesar-like figure in President Trump being perhaps his most prophetic.¹³

¹¹ James Joll "Two Prophets of the Twentieth Century: Spengler and Toynbee." *Review of International Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985): 91-104.

¹² William MacDonal, "Oswald Spengler Concludes His Philosophy of History; He Sees Democracy Doomed to Extinction at the Hands of the Press, Money and Caesarism Spengler Concludes His Philosophy of History." *The New York Times*. December 2, 1928.

¹³ Kerry R. Bolton, "Spengler, Epigenetics, and the Idea of 'Race'," *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 44 (1) (2019): 141-160.

In this work, Spengler created a dizzying picture of the history of cultures and civilisations by spearheading what he, like many thinkers preceding him,¹⁴ called a “Copernican Revolution” in his approach to how he believed history should be viewed. First, and perhaps most importantly to Spengler, he rejected the popular approach to historical investigation by liberating historical thought from the “limitations of its Eurocentricity,” which found its crowning achievement in the works of Hegel while simultaneously dismissing the prominent linear view of historical progress which drew sharp distinctions between the ancient, medieval and modern eras. What this did was shatter the illusion and idealism of the idea of progress, which had become so central to the nineteenth century zeitgeist while employing new possibilities for a cyclical model to be utilised when attempting to order the phenomenon of history.¹⁵

Second, Spengler aims to expand “into the conception of a morphology of world history, of the world-as-history in contrast to the morphology of the world-as-nature that hitherto has been almost the only theme of philosophy.”¹⁶ To achieve this end of creating a morphology of history, the indication being that history can be viewed as living or organic, Spengler wished to move away from the “identification of dead forms” via mathematical law¹⁷ and,

¹⁴ For example, Kant, states in the Preface of his *Critique of Pure Reason*: “This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. Now in metaphysics we can try in a similar way regarding the intuition of objects,” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge, United Kingdom. Cambridge University Press. 1998. 110.)

¹⁵ In a way Spengler pre-empted what the later John Lukacs would assert in his *Historical Consciousness; Or the Remembered Past*; that the West has evolved a Historical Consciousness in which every facet of human action can be understood through an understanding of history. (John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness; Or the Remembered Past*. England, United Kingdom: Routledge. 1994)

¹⁶ Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. I*, 5.

¹⁷ “Kant, who in his main work established the formal rules of cognition, took nature only as the object of reason’s activity, and neither he himself, nor anyone after him, noted the reservation. Knowledge, for Kant, is mathematical knowledge. He deals with innate intuition

instead, made use of analogy which, for him, is “the means whereby to understand living forms”:

Analogies, insofar laid bare the organic structure of history, might be a blessing to historical thought. Their technique, developing under the influence of a comprehensive idea, would surely eventuate in inevitable conclusions and logical mastery.¹⁸

Here we can already see some loose resemblances to Girard’s methodology. Rather than relying on a concept which treats world history as a “dead form” and the history of culture as the process of a self-maturation of reason which will inevitably and essentially reach a perfection via historical self-corrections through introspection, Spengler understands that in studying history analogously the opposite is true: seeing each succeeding culture as a mere historical forerunner for the next, we miss the historical fact that each of the high cultures of history, from Babylonia onwards, have repeated the same errors, leading to their decline and eventual downfall in ever-repeating analogous and contemporaneous stages. Girard, in his turn, through his study of myth, recognises that the creation of each myth is analogous to the ever-repeating ur-scenario; that the creation of the myth of one culture, whether prior to or after the myth of another, unrelated culture, though separated by time and place, is essentially analogous to the one act – the unconscious deferment to a mechanism that shrouds human violence in myth in favour of a pharmacological, cathartic resolution which, although foundationally and ultimately self-destructive, serves as the only fortification against a mimetic crisis fatal to a burgeoning culture were it not abated.

forms and categories of the reason, but he never thinks of the wholly different mechanism by which historical impressions are apprehended,” Spengler, *Decline of the West Vol. I*, 6.

¹⁸ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. I*, 4.

For Spengler, world history is “a picture of endless formations and transformations, of the marvellous waxing and waning of organic forms” rather than “a sort of tapeworm industriously adding on to itself one epoch after another.”¹⁹ What Spengler saw in history was the “living nature” which Goethe, Spengler’s primary influence, espoused in works such as *Metamorphosis of Plants* and *Theory of Colours*, which aimed at challenging the prevailing domination of Newtonian methodology. In Goethe’s *Living Nature*, Spengler found inspiration for his world-as-history, the thing becoming rather than the thing become. For him, the world-as-mechanism stood opposed to the world-as-organism, dead nature to living nature, law to form; this was the essence of what he termed his “physiognomic” approach – to look at things intuitively rather than scientifically.

With this insight of Goethe’s, Spengler could finally announce his grand scheme:

Let the words youth, growth, maturity, decay – hitherto, and today more than ever, used to express subjective valuations and entirely personal preferences in sociology, ethics and aesthetics – be taken at last as objective descriptions of organic states. Set forth the Classical Culture as a self-contained phenomenon embodying and expressing the Classical Soul, put it beside the Egyptian, the Indian, the Babylonian, the Chinese and the Western, and determine for each of these higher individuals what is typical in their surgings and what is necessary in the riot of incident. And then at last will unfold itself the picture of World history that is natural to us, men of the West, and to us alone.²⁰

With Spengler’s methodological revolution in full swing, he presents the narrower purpose of unveiling his blueprint to the world:

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

Primarily to determine, from such a world survey, the state of West Europe and America as at the epoch of 1800-2000 – to establish the chronological position of this period in the ensemble of Western culture history, its significance as a chapter that is in one or other guise necessarily found in the biography of every Culture, and the organic and symbolic meaning of its political, artistic, intellectual and social expression forms.²¹

Spengler, in availing himself wholeheartedly to the use of analogy while rejecting the prominent view of historical progress, aims at broadening the “limited problem of present day civilization”²² into a more far-reaching and ambitious philosophy of the future, or, more specifically, ‘the philosophy of the future ... the only philosophy which is within the possibilities of the West European mind in its next stages.’²³ By comparing contemporaneously and analogously the great cultures of history, of which he specifically names eight, and applying an organic, living pattern to each of these, Spengler believes he is able to discern a cycle inherent in the growth and decline of each culture which is ever repeating itself with only slight variations based on what he terms a culture’s metaphysical Ur-Symbol or Prime Symbol, that is, a Will governed by the culture’s geographical surroundings which, in turn, governs its cultural creations.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid.

All roads lead to Rome

*O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies; not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind.*²⁴

Chief among these analogies is the comparative analysis made between the Roman Imperium and the modern West. It is this analogy that overwhelmingly receives the most attention and is the primary tool for Spengler to begin to dictate the terms for what he believes constitutes the great rise of a living culture and its subsequent decline into a dead or dying civilisation. It is this comparison that is the cornerstone of Spengler's analysis of the crisis of our modern world in decline. Some contemporary Spengler scholars such as John Farrenkopf assert that it was Spengler who broke new ground with his comparative analysis of the two, though how original or accurate this analogy is remains a point of contention.²⁵ Many in the modern West, particularly America, have continued to make use of this comparison via the Spenglerian schema with the most (in)famous being Francis Yockey's *Imperium: The Philosophy of History and Politics*.

Nonetheless, to begin with we must venture to understand what, for Spengler, constituted the difference between a culture and a civilisation in order to better understand the comparison between the Imperium and twentieth century Europe. Spengler uses the imagery of the seasons to enhance his vision of the culture-civilisation process: a culture is born in its springtime only to finally decay at the end of its winter, which Spengler claims the West is currently experiencing. For Spengler, the culture is youth – it is the essence of “the thing becoming” as a culture springs forth out of the fear of death “with primitive strength from the soil of a mother region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its life cycle; each

²⁴ Melville, *Moby Dick*, 340.

²⁵ John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press. 2001)

stamping its material, its mankind, in *its own* image; each having *its own* idea, *its own* passions, *its own* life, will and feeling, *its own* death.”²⁶

If the study of comparative religion by Frazer²⁷ and the twentieth-century sociologists aimed to create a unified picture for the motivations for religious belief and, in essence, concluded their motivations to be one and the same, Spengler’s comparative cultural historiography opened up a new conversation wherein, through the side-by-side comparison of self-contained cultures, we could begin to understand, and create a unified picture of what motivates a culture to rise up from the general obscurity of history, why a system of metaphysics inevitably takes hold of this culture, and why they stagnate and decline. For Spengler a culture is:

born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of the proto-spirituality (*dem urseelenhaften zustande*) of ever childish humanity, and detaches itself, a form from the formless, a bounded and mortal thing from the boundless and enduring.” What causes this birth and the subsequent stages of a culture’s fulfilment is “an inner passionate struggle to maintain the Idea against the powers of Chaos”²⁸

The chief feature of a culture’s youth, its ultimate essence, according to Spengler, is that it is highly religious – an age of accelerating faith and construction of form. The religion of a culture, according to Spengler, “is crucial to the whole spirit and style of a Culture.”²⁹ This religion, however, remains subservient to a culture’s Ur-Symbol, its unique perspective based upon its conception of space. This prime symbol never actualises itself but is operative

²⁶ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 1*, 15.

²⁷ James Frazer, in his *The Golden Bough*, completes a comparative study of the world’s myth and religions. In it he argues that religions held shared elements of religious belief and practice. His central thesis asserts that old religions were fertility cults that centered around the worship and periodic sacrifice of a sacred king.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁹ Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline*, 32.

“through the form sense of every man, every community, age and epoch and dictates the style of every life expression. It is inherent in the form of the state, the religious myths and cults, the ethical ideals, the forms of painting and music and poetry, the fundamental notions of each science – but it is not presented by these.”³⁰ Here, we see for Spengler, that “religious myths” are nothing but the manifestations of a culture’s prime symbol, a necessary but idiosyncratic creation during the early stages of a culture’s emerging life-form.³¹ It is this “choice of prime symbol” during the awakening of a culture’s soul into self-consciousness that “decides all.” While the prime symbol is never consciously apprehended by a culture, as mentioned above, it is from a fear of death in which a mythology is born around which, after this fear has been conquered, will, force and deed are further developed as derivatives of the over-arching prime symbol.³²

It is perhaps on this line where Girard and Spengler draw closest to one another yet stand in greatest opposition. Without getting too far ahead of our story, for each thinker it is fear that primarily motivates the formation of necessary bulwarks against the overwhelming symbolism of nature and its chaotic indifference. For Girard, this struggle to maintain the idea against the powers of chaos can be seen as a culture’s myth and its implicit rituals and prohibitions standing against the destructive chaos of the mimetic mechanism left unchecked. Spengler, on the other hand, recognises that it is the idea of the burgeoning culture, its will

³⁰ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 1*, 130.

³¹ For example, Spengler says of the Indian civilisation: “It takes a Brahmanic soul to perceive these numbers (0) as self-evident, as ideal emblems of a self-complete world-form; to us they are as unintelligible as is the Brahman Nirvana, for which, as lying beyond life *and* death, sleep *and* waking, passion, compassion *and* dispassion and yet somehow actual, words entirely fail us. Only this spirituality could originate the grand conception of *nothingness as a true number, zero*, and even then this zero is the Indian zero for which existent and non-existent are equally external designations.” Ibid., 178.

³² See Steven Bonta, “Towards a semiotic theory of historico-cultural cycles: The semiotic contours of Spengler’s “prime symbols”” *Semiotica* no. 202 (2014), 589-607. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/10.1515/sem-2014-0048> for a detailed exposition regarding this portion of Spengler’s thought.

represented in the Ur-Symbol, which stands as the barrier to the chaos of barbarism and the inevitability of death. Each recognises the prominent place of religion in assuaging the fear of chaos and its utmost importance in establishing the style of their life expressions, and each recognises that there is a taming of chaotic violence, so to speak, in favour of ordered violence, which allows a society to emerge from out of pre-cultural barbarism into a working society. Having said this, however, the fundamental and essential difference lies in each writer's conclusion for the true logic of such a compromise. For Spengler, this is a triumph of the will of a culture, the true mark of a culture willing to take history into its own hands and, importantly, enter into history rather than remain in the ahistorical chaos of creaturely existence. For Girard this is a flawed bargain between humanity and a force requiring ritualistic satiation through sacrifice; a force which incentivises order via the periodic immolation of a surrogate victim representing the original victim who, in the minds of the society, made contact with, and is synonymous with, the benevolent force bestowing this self-same order. Herein lies a crucial anthropological distinction between the two writers, one which itself acts as an analogy of the disparity between the deeper-seeded philosophical system to which they both adhere, respectively. This disparity will be the major focus of subsequent chapters.

Nevertheless, this Spenglerian conception of a variance in the souls of different cultures provides a reasonable alternative to the predominant view of a progressive perfection of aesthetic form that dismisses non-European art forms as primitive. Rather, Spengler recognises that no other art form was possible to a particular culture due to its unique *Weltanschauung* and the all-determining "Ur-Symbol" that governed the forms to which it both related and clung to.

As an example, Spengler makes various comparisons between the Western "soul," which he deems Faustian, and the Greek, or Classical soul which he terms *Apollinian*. The prime

symbol of the Apollinian soul is the point-present body, the “sensuously present individual body as the ideal type of the extended.” In contrast or opposition to this is the Faustian soul whose symbol is that of “pure and limitless space.” He further expands on the contrast:

Apollinian are: mechanical statics, the sensuous cult of the Olympian gods, the politically individual city states of Greece, the doom of Oedipus and the phallus symbol. Faustian are: Galilean dynamics. Catholic and Protestant dogmatics, the great dynasties of the Baroque with their cabinet diplomacy, the destiny of Lear and the Madonna ideal from Dante’s Beatrice to the last line of Faust II. The painting that defines the individual body by contours is Apollinian, that which forms space by means of light and shade is Faustian – this is the difference between the fresco of Polygnotus and the oil painting of Rembrandt. The Apollinian existence is that of the Greek who describes his ego as soma and who lacks all idea of an inner development and therefore all real history, inward and outward; the Faustian is an existence which is led with a deep consciousness and introspection of the ego and a resolutely personal culture evidenced in memoirs, reflection, retrospects and prospects and conscience [...]³³

Rather than these expressions being evolutions of a singular form across time, Spengler applies the same methodology to these artistic and political expressions. These expressions are unique to one culture only, born with them and doomed to die with them; they are organisms, not a system. The theory and convention all belong to the souls’ character and contain nothing within them of an eternal or universal validity. These are born with a culture and die within it and, for the most part, with it. While Spengler uses art as his main example for this expression of world-feeling, he makes it quite clear that most, if not all, cultural

³³ Ibid., 135.

manifestations are but derivatives of this unique will peculiar to one culture. There are no transcendent forces of causality for Spengler, whether a God or a final end; rather, it is the form that organises the flow of becoming into an intelligible totality.

Like any organism, this “thing-becoming” must eventually exhaust itself into the “thing-become,” but before this happens, drawing from its mythology, a culture continues to perfect its form over the course of its “seasons” though never with the vigour of its inwardly spiritual springtime. In the case of the Faustian, moving from spring to summer and into autumn, we find a culture’s soul depicting its happiness yet conscious of its self-completion. Music has found its ultimate expression in the chamber music of Mozart; art in Rembrandt and his “The Night Watch,” mathematics in the infinitesimal calculus of Leibniz and dynamics of Newton, politics in the grand politics of the *Ancien Regime*. As autumn draws to its close, however, we begin to find the exhaustion of all creative forms. The last, dying movements of Classicism and Romanticism, Beethoven’s music and the philosophy of Goethe, Hegel, Kant and Schelling represent the very last stage of a culture’s becoming as it concretises into the thing-become. I will return to this essential point later in the thesis but, for the moment, I will continue to examine Spengler’s thought into this most crucial of steps, that is, when a culture becomes a civilisation.

While Spengler carefully paces through his elucidation of his world-as-history, he spends the majority of the work discussing the namesake of his work, that is, the stages of decline in a culture: when it crosses the threshold of its living nature into the dead megalopolis of the civilisation. That a culture should eventually exhaust the creative possibilities available to it is a historical surety for Spengler, and what results at this juncture – when a culture has fully realised itself in a “world-city” and exhausted its creative potential – is Spengler’s civilisation represented by the megalopolis. In asserting this pattern of growth and decline, Spengler found the intellectual space that allowed him to make many assertions on the then current

state of his modernity and to prophesy the future with implacable self-assuredness. His confidence came from what John Farrenkopf identified as Spengler's breaking new ground in the comparative analysis of the crisis of the modern West and the Roman Imperium.³⁴

In Spengler's schema, Rome was to the civilisation stage what the earlier Hellenes were to the culture stage for the Apollinian soul. Unlike most historians of his time, Spengler considered the Greco-Roman soul and destiny as unrelated and separated from the Faustian or Western European soul. For Spengler, the Imperium represented the dried up, culturally exhausted, civilizational end to the Apollinian soul which had found its living youth in the Hellenic age. This corresponds, for Spengler, to the exhausted, history-less civilisation stage of the Faustian Soul, represented in the modern West, compared to the livingly connected and creative culture of early Catholic Germany of the Gothic period, the time in which Spengler located the West's birth into history. Whereas Spengler found in the culture stage a living connectedness to blood and soil – a period of heroism and piety, of creative explosions in all aspects of living – he found its opposite in civilisation. Spengler is verging on over-romanticising the early-cultural phase when he describes it as “virile ... intense ... marvellous in its ease and self-confidence,”³⁵ in comparison to his overly pessimistic view of civilization, describing it as “death following life, rigidity following expansion”;³⁶ however, as extreme as his oppositional stances may be, his views have seemingly been vindicated by the passage of time according to both his modern adherents and thinkers like the abovementioned Adorno.³⁷

³⁴ Farrenkopf, J. *Prophet of Decline*.

³⁵ Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. I*, 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷ Theodor Adorno, “Spengler after the Decline” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, (Cambridge, Massachusetts. MIT Press), 51-73.

What, then, was Spengler able to uncover through this contemporaneous examination of our time with that of the Imperium? To begin with let us further ascertain what accompanies the shift from the phase of youth to that of decay.

The cultural phase is full of creativity. During this period, people have a feeling for the “organism” of pure history. Life is “intuitively seen, inwardly experienced, grasped as a Form or Symbol, and finally rendered in poetical and artistic conceptions.”³⁸ Peasant villages on the mother-landscape grow out of the ground “earnest, big with destiny, Being without waking consciousness,”³⁹ slowly “Being becomes more and more languid, sensation and reason more and more powerful.”⁴⁰

Ultimately, however,

Man becomes intellect, “free” like the nomads, whom he comes to resemble, but narrower and colder than they. “Intellect,” “Geist,” “espirit,” is the specific urban form of the understanding waking consciousness. All art, all religion and science, become slowly intellectualised, alien to the land, incomprehensible to the peasant of the soil. With the Civilisation sets in the climacteric. The immemorially old roots of Being are dried up in the stone masses of its cities. And the free intellect – fateful word! – appears like a flame, mounts splendid into the air, and pitiably dies.⁴¹

From this central change of soul to intellect, a host of necessary processes take place ranging from the sociological and economic to the internal and metaphysical, many of which have arguably been observed in our own time and mirrored in the decaying Rome. When all roads lead to Rome or any other analogous world-city rather than the provincial or town village –

³⁸ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol.1*, 43.

³⁹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 2*, 63.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

which represents for Spengler the visible body of the soul of a culture – the great disconnect between man, history and his blood and soil occurs. For Spengler this represented a “wholly new form problem of History, the very problem that we are living through today with hardly the remotest conception of its immensity. In place of a world, there is a city, a point, in which the whole life of broad regions is collecting while the rest dries up.”⁴² Here in these cities a “new type of raw man”⁴³ is bred, “in place of a type true people, born of and grown on the soil, there is a new sort of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitical city dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact [...]”⁴⁴ For this new type of raw man, the intellectual nomad, who lives disconnected from the felt Being of his blood and soil, who resides in a state of historylessness, a whole host of changes has occurred which, for Spengler and many other thinkers, has separated him from his pre-civilisational ancestors.

A decline by any other name ...

*Listen, are we helpless? Are we doomed to do it again and again and again? Have we no choice but to play the Phoenix in an unending sequence of rise and fall? Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Carthage, Rome, the Empires of Charlemagne and the Turk. Ground to dust and plowed with salt. Spain, France, Britain, America – burned into the oblivion of the centuries. And again and again and again.*⁴⁵

In light of the previous chapter concerning a Girardian theory of sacrificial violence, it may seem rather puzzling as to why such care is being taken regarding a Spenglerian theory of civilizational decline. What place, if any, does an extended analysis of the move from his culture stage to civilisation stage have in the broader sense of the thesis, and what possible

⁴² Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol.1*, 25.

⁴³ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 2*, 70.

⁴⁴ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol.1*, 25.

⁴⁵ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 264.

connection could the two theories have? While at this stage there seems to be a disconnect between the two, pursuing this line of thought will show the way in which a Girardian re-reading of pre-mimetic oriented philosophies can serve to reassess Spengler's theses – in essence, re-evaluating them and their proximity to an overall truth as professed by Girard, and also, to recognise how this same phenomena happens in the reverse: how a theory such as Spengler's, seemingly altogether separate from Girardian concepts, can indeed offer further insights into both the workings, and repercussions, of the mimetic crisis. For it is the next stage of civilizational decline and the coincident hyper-intellectualisation that appears which will allow us in consequent chapters to analyse this phenomenon via an amalgam of both philosophies.

But to better understand this phase of Spengler's recurrent historical civilizational decline we must at first limit ourselves to the modern West. Although Spengler is vehement that this cycle is unalterable and a destiny all cultures must share, he also recognises that the West is an exception to all cultures that precede it.

Nonetheless there are analogies that can be applied universally when discussing cultural decline; chiefly among these is the acceleration of rationalism in favour of mystical thinking, or what Charles Taylor has described as the shift from the porous self to the buffered. Taylor, in his *A Secular Age*, seeks to understand this phenomenon of rationalism superseding what he termed naivety through a detailed analysis of the secularisation of Latin Christendom. While his story, as he called it, is primarily focused on the West around the years 1500 to 2000, his analyses of archaic societies prior to this time period carries with it a universal tone; that is, that this story is shared by all human societies prior to the exceptional case of that of the West in the medieval period. What he discusses in these early chapters is comparable to the development described above by Spengler: the move from an agent in touch with and a part of the world around him, to one who has receded into, and found refuge in, an

instrumental rationality. I will pick up on Spengler's interpretation further on; however, I defer to Taylor at this point as he provides us with an intriguing and, perhaps, more lucid account of the phenomenon, not only detailing the broader social changes inherent in this movement but also that of the individual agent therein. His account can further complement Spengler's through its far more restrained approach and can serve to broaden the conversation regarding a modern crisis to include religion.

Taylor, much more than Spengler, recognises that the affliction common to a culture's rational, intellectual epoch is that of a spiritual nature which affects the very experience of the Being-in-the-world of the individual agents. For Taylor, the rise of the urban intellect of the elites eventually awakens the "buffered" self as against the formerly "porous" self, which can also be viewed as awakening the sceptical as against the naïve. What he means by this is that for the "porous" self the source of the most important emotions are outside of the "mind"; "or better put, the very notion that there is a clear boundary, allowing us to define an inner base area, grounded in which we can disengage from the rest, has no sense."⁴⁶ Experiencing life as a porous self means that the individual lives in a condition where they are vulnerable to spirits, demons and cosmic forces, which, along with these, can cause a certain fear that can grip one in various circumstances. As the buffered self, however, one can see the boundary as a buffer so that anything beyond this does not necessarily "get to" someone – the self sees itself as "invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it."⁴⁷ As the porous individual, the human is still, in a sense, at the mercy of the supernatural forces of nature. The world around him is enchanted and populated by spirits both benign and malevolent which impede on his everyday life leading him to be, in essence, bound to these forces for better or worse. The buffered individual, however, can "form the ambition of disengaging from whatever is

⁴⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 2007), 38.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

beyond the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life. The absence of fear can be not just enjoyed, but seen as an opportunity for self-control or self-direction.”⁴⁸ This is mirrored in Spengler’s analogous analysis of the porous versus buffered self:

In the earliest time the landscape-figure alone dominates man's eyes. It gives form to his soul and vibrates in tune therewith. Feelings and woodland rustlings beat together; the meadows and the copses adapt themselves to its shape, to its course, even to its dress ... The country town confirms the country, is an intensification of the picture of the country.⁴⁹

This all changes, according to Spengler, when

The new Soul of the City speaks a new language, which soon comes to be tantamount to the language of the Culture itself. The open land with its village-mankind is wounded; it no longer understands that language, it is nonplussed and dumb. All genuine style-history is played out in the cities. It is exclusively the city's destiny and the life-experience of urban men that speaks to the eye in the logic of visible forms.⁵⁰

When viewed like this, disbelief in religion is hard, if not impossible in the enchanted world. Here God “figures in the world as the dominant spirit,” where the mere prospect of rejecting this God would mean betting on oneself against the entire host of “spiritually charged” objects one is undoubtedly going to engage with in his travels and travails. This is what I believe to be the crux of what Spengler means when he says that the essence of every culture is religious. During the culture’s springtime, “Primeval man is a ranging animal, a being whose waking-consciousness restlessly feels its way through life, all microcosm, under no servitude of place or home, keen and anxious in its senses, ever alert to drive off some

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 2*, 94.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 63.

element of hostile Nature.”⁵¹ With the first act of agriculture, of controlling nature rather than being prey to it, humanity unknowingly sets in motion the beginning of a long process of intellectualisation which finally ends in their buffering themselves through the evolution from culture to civilisation.

While this process is a protracted one, lasting many centuries, the effects it has on the later generations who find themselves in this new buffered milieu is so pronounced that it can be considered as nearing a diametric opposition. As against the porous individual, who finds themselves at the mercy of external phenomena, the buffered individual blocks off this boundary between the internal and external. This produces the effect of endowing a sense of invulnerability on the population of such a milieu. No longer do they need to fear the porous entry of spirits into their consciousness, nor the divine swing of luck’s pendulum from good fortune to bad. These anxieties, under the new buffered self, cease to play a role at all, as humans began to possess a “secure inner mental realm”⁵² free from the power and influence of God. This empowerment instils a sense of pride in one’s own self-worth with the conquering of illogical fears based on superstition and fanaticism. In a sense we have “transcended” beyond this world. This harbours an ethic of freedom where a civilisation “remoulds all the forms of the culture that went before, understands them otherwise, practises them in a different way. It begets no more, but only reinterprets [...]”⁵³ On the political/ethical spectrum, for Spengler, this engenders a civilisation towards historical analogies of modern day socialism:

All metaphysic of the high style, all pure intuition, vanishes before the one need that has suddenly made itself felt, the need of a practical morale for the governance of a

⁵¹ Ibid., 61.

⁵² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301.

⁵³ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 1*, 257.

Life that can no longer govern itself. Up to Kant, up to Aristotle, Up to the Yoga and Vedanta doctrines, philosophy had been a sequence of grand world-systems in which formal ethics occupied a very modest place. But now it became "moral philosophy" with a metaphysic as background. The enthusiasm of epistemology had to give way to hard practical needs. Socialism, Stoicism and Buddhism are philosophies of this type.⁵⁴

Taylor deepens this examination as he recognises that the buffered self undergoes more changes outside of the mere governance of the collective. The sense arises that we are missing or cut off from something. It is as if, through our transcendence, we have lost, or forgotten something along the way. Many of the more sensitively inclined begin looking for other outlets of this "missing feeling." The search for this outlet within the buffered identity, in parallel with the now inherent feeling of invulnerability, means that there seems to be nothing to stand out for it outside of the human world. Lacking to fill the void, the feeling of loss becomes an overbearing and constant experience. Inevitably this condition will lead us to the perception that we feel our actions or goals have lost all their meanings. What once seemed to stifle this sense now seems nonsensical and meaningless and, to add to this grim decorum, whatever answers we may come up with seem just as fragile as the choices we had made up to that point.

Underneath all this dispersal of tension through *détente*, another force hitherto truncated by religion, begins to make its way to the surface, namely, violence. In the cultural phase - the milieu of spiritual orthodoxy and communal adherence - violence is curtailed by religion and the social traditions and practices that arise from a society which remains faithful to them. This is not to say that violence is non-existent in these epochs, but that there are a host

⁵⁴ Ibid., 259.

of contingent factors which disallow its eruption into what Spengler terms the *period of bloodshed* which is fated to occur in the winter of every culture (and which will receive much more attention in the following chapter). These contingencies are numerous and Spengler, who does not concentrate on violence qua violence, believes that the cultural phase is one of piety and heroism, each of which do well in their own right to satisfy both the religious and agonistic needs of the population through their interrelation. This is as far as Spengler ventures to assert in regard to pre-civilizational violence, and it is here where Taylor's study can help expand on this vital point.

Taylor understands that violence as a subterranean force is an ever-present shadow cast over a population with the power to erupt were it not for a concerted effort on the part of all strata of a cohesive society aimed at dispelling it. For Taylor, in a milieu in which a society is still extremely religious and the individuals therein "porous," as per the above definition, violence finds its outlet in myriad ways, each of which adhere to the prohibitions and taboos associated with the predominating belief system. In fact, it is precisely their adherence to the overarching belief system that adds to the power to dispel. There are several ways that this occurs, and Taylor explains it in the following terms.

Just as Spengler espouses an equilibrium between heroism and piety in early cultures, so too does Taylor when he recognises, particularly in mediaeval Catholicism, that the tensions between ordinary human flourishing and the requirements of ongoing human life were acquiesced through an organising principle based on hierarchical complementarity; that is, "The clergy pray for all, the lords defend all, the peasants labour for all."⁵⁵ This meant that "there is in principle a place for something less than the highest vocation and aspirations,"⁵⁶ and that the tension between peasant and nobility, or destitute and affluent, was in some way

⁵⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

eased when all fell into an organising principle based on achieving both a self-transcendent and ordinary, everyday flourishing. Self-transcendence was achieved through the recognition that society was ordered around God's "existential-foundational role"⁵⁷ within which our ordinary human flourishing maintained social cohesion based on the complementarities of social roles.

Perhaps more importantly, societies under the influence of a shared religion or spiritual doctrine bring tension into equilibrium in "Carnival and similar festivities" which, in essence, are "periods in which the ordinary order of things was inverted" or "the world was turned upside down."⁵⁸ What Taylor means in saying this is that for a short while there was a playful interlude to the regular order of things wherein a condition of reversal was played out with fools made kings for a day, where what normally revered was mocked and vice-versa. It was a time in which "people permitted themselves various forms of license, not just sexually but also in close-to-violent acts."⁵⁹ These Carnivals are a universal feature of burgeoning cultures and not merely isolated to mediaeval Christianity: Taylor, in a Spenglerian manner, mentions that "people have related these festivals to the Roman Saturnalia [...] The thinking behind this parallel draws on theories about the Saturnalia and other similar festivals (e.g., in ancient Mesopotamia, and also the Aztec renewals of the world)."⁶⁰ In fact it is still a feature today in some contemporary African societies at the crowning of a new king who must first be "kicked and shoved by his subjects to be."⁶¹ I will return to this in far more detail in a later chapter; however, at this current juncture it suffices to say that this act of carnival served not only to bring balance and social cohesion but also served as a form of steam-release valve in

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 48.

which “the foolishness innate in us can come out and evaporate,”⁶² much like the opening of wine barrel air-holes prevents them from bursting. What is most important to mention when it comes to this periodic overturning is that it is not aimed at putting forward an alternative to the established order but, rather, serves to bolster and strengthen that which already exists: “We periodically renew it, rededicate it, return it to its original meaning, by suspending it in the name of the community, which is fundamentally, ultimately of equals, and which underlies it.”⁶³ Furthermore, “it is the whole complementarity of state and church together which plays the structural pole to the anti-structure of Carnival.”⁶⁴

Viewed in this way, this controlled violence under the auspice of a mythology regulated by prohibitions and taboos serves not to hinder social progress nor sever social ties but, rather, to aid in “renewing” the established divine/human order. Additionally, it is this exact order which concurrently stops violence from escalating beyond that that could possibly destroy a community if left to intensify uncontrolled.

This extremely vital aspect – that is, of the communally cohesive function of a mythology in a culture’s youth – is something understood yet intellectually neglected by Spengler, and whilst this thesis is not necessarily a meditation on violence it serves to show that, outside of being a manifestation of a culture’s Prime Symbol influencing a culture’s ethics and moral guidelines, it is perhaps also the unguent to overarching communal unity; something which Girard adamantly states and which I will return to.

But first, a necessary summary of what this chapter has so far indicated. A cursory study of Spengler’s thesis in *Decline of the West* reveals a thinker attempting something not altogether uncommon in the academic climate in which he found himself, that is, to create for

⁶² Ibid., 46.

⁶³ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 50.

the reader a grand narrative of the human endeavour encompassing cultural-social beginnings, its progression in the form of a culture and its materialisations, and its subsequent destiny, for better or worse. We find in Spengler an interesting and quite cryptic schema for the abovementioned study; one which, nonetheless, has enjoyed quite the emphatic resurgence in a milieu Spengler himself foresaw. Despite this chapter having looked at his writings in a broadly roundabout and general fashion, I was able to disseminate some important points regarding his thesis, as I discuss in the following.

The first and most important was Spengler's rejection of the progressive-linear method of viewing history that had dominated historical thought since the monumental work of Hegel and his German Idealist cohort. This in turn opened up for Spengler a new intellectual space within which he was free to assert his cyclical, organic view of history: one which gave no precedent to any culture but, rather, saw them as self-contained biological units each with their own unique form, soul and Will. Despite their uniqueness, Spengler espied a universal commonality in their histories: a historical recurrence of growth, maturation and decline each with analogous stages that coincided with contemporaneous sectors in each other's life cycles. Chief of these analogous and contemporaneous stages is that of the eventual concretisation of a culture's life force, its connection to its blood and soil, as it relies on instrumental reason to buffer itself, in Taylor's term, from its former porous exposure to the spiritual forces it once cowed before. It does this through a hyper-rationalisation as villages becomes towns and towns become cities and, eventually for the "higher cultures", the megalopolis. Here, free from the dangers of the world-out-there, intellectualisation comes to dominate and a life force that was freely felt by all in the *joie de vivre* of a culture's golden ages becomes a *détente* in the spiritual prison of the city.

Lastly, I took a strategically cursory glance at Spengler's views on religion and how he understood it in relation to the beginnings of a culture: how it manages to sustain itself but,

with the movement of his historical decline, can only sustain itself for so long when, after a culture has exhausted its creativity drawn from its myth, it too exhausts itself under the pressure of the abovementioned rational usurpation – a thought in line with Taylor’s.

This is as far as we ventured into the recesses of Spengler’s thought; however, lurking beneath these historical movements of his remains the threat of violence, for as briefly mentioned above there is another historical recurrence which has assaulted every culture from the lowest to the highest since time immemorial: the ‘period of bloodshed’. This period is central to the overall crisis that a former living culture finds itself in when it becomes a dead civilisation. It is this crisis which will now be compared to that of Girard’s, wherein our conversation can delve far deeper into the thought of both of these thinkers in order to ascertain from their combined points of view what a crisis in modernity, if we are experiencing one at all, could or does look like.

What should, also, at this point be emerging from the last two chapters is the impression of coincidence between Spengler’s and Girard’s theories. By presenting each thinker separately and, as it were, with a strategic focus on some aspects of their thought over others, the intended effect was to arouse the intuition toward some overlap between the two. Specifically, we have seen in this chapter, via Taylor, how for Spengler, the inevitable death of a culture is preceded by the loss of a tradition-based, religious milieu in favour of a buffered rationality. More importantly, however, this decay is marked by the displacement of energies that hitherto had been kept in check by the respective festivals of misrule. With our work on *crisis* ever in view, we can see how for Spengler this turn of events marks in some way the reanimation of chaotic energies and, while he simply marks these as the inevitable movements of history, from a Girardian framework this represents the acceleration of mimetic contagion without the bulwark of religious renewal and the “healthy” dispersal of the energy. While for Spengler, again, this is a recurrent and unavoidable phenomenon, he

believes that the identification of this phenomena could shed some light on the crisis of his day, namely, the first World War. For Girard, the further acceleration of this violent energy seems to be *the* crisis with which contemporary society needs to contend.

Through the simultaneous blending and separation of the thought of both Spengler and Girard, each operating through the lens of separate philosophies, we can begin to determine which, if either, comes closest to a *truth* regarding our modern malaises and which, if either, is operating on a principle which seeks to undermine truth and cloak itself in lies.

Chapter 3: Crisis

Croak and wheeze. But you can growl too, and that's well for the leader of the pack. Listen.

None of us has been really able. But we've tried, and we've been tried. It tries you to destruction, but you're here for that. This Order has had abbots of gold, abbots of cold tough steel, abbots of corroded lead, and none of them was able, although some were abler than others, some even saints. The gold got battered, the steel got brittle and broke and the corroded lead got stamped into ashes by Heaven. Me, I've been lucky enough to be quicksilver; I spatter, but I run back together somehow. I feel another spattering coming on, though, Brother, and I think it's for keeps this time. What are you made of, son? What's to be tried?¹

In the previous two chapters I unpacked, in as broad a way as possible, the theories of two of the most divisive thinkers of the 21st century. The first, René Girard, posited a radical new theory on the nature of desire, which he deemed mimetic, and which, when anthropologically and culturally applied, provided the humanities with a startling blueprint for the process of hominization and the movement from pre-cultural to post-cultural societies. In this theory, Girard supposed that the imitative nature of desire, based on the mediation of the other, inevitably resulted in a rivalry culminating in violent conflict; a conflict which necessarily undifferentiated these rivals, creating doubles of each other and yet, nonetheless, magnetically pulling in all those that came into contact with the rivalry as they each aligned themselves with one side as against the other. The resulting pandemic of conflictual-energy-turned-violent would lead to its paroxysm which, if not dealt with, would result in a war of

¹ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 283.

all-against-all. It is at this stage that an unconscious mechanism emerges which turns this apocalyptic violence of all-against-all into all-against-one – or, unanimity minus one – what Girard termed the *scapegoat mechanism*. A scapegoat is singled out and, based on the belief that he or she is the cause of mimetic crisis, all violent energy is transferred and imparted onto him or her through their expulsion or, commonly, his or her violent death. As it goes, the catharsis that follows this act leads to the deification of the scapegoat and the eventual origination of a society's taboos, prohibitions and rituals, all aiming at the glorification of the victim turned deity while the original impetus for the conflict and subsequent murder are linguistically and symbolically veiled in the myth of that particular culture.

The second thinker, Oswald Spengler, also introduced to the academic world a rather radical theory, this time dealing with a philosophy of history. In this theory Spengler spearheaded his, albeit unoriginally named, “Copernican Revolution,” which aimed to separate itself from other similarly themed theses through an introduction of three original and fundamental concepts. The first was to reject the linear-progressive view of history as moving from the ancient epoch through to the medieval and ending in the modern in a continual line. The outcome of this led to the second concept, that is, to reject the Eurocentricity so common to the treatment of history at that time which treats European civilization as the culmination and perfection of historical-civilisational movement. In rejecting these two predominant ideas, Spengler made use of an organic view of history based on the theories of Goethe. In this scheme each culture is its own self-contained organism, each with its own peculiar will² out of which all its cultural expressions are made manifest.

² Schopenhauer was a clear influence on Spengler and many of his ideas are explicit in all of his works. Farrenkopf notes, “For Hegel world history is the triumphant march of the *Weltgeist*, for Spengler, a student of Hegel's archrival Schopenhauer, it is the mark of the *Weltwille*, the tragic, irrational odyssey of human will towards catastrophe.” (John Farrenkopf “The Transformation of Spengler's Philosophy of World History”. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 52, No.3 Jul.–Sep., 1991: 477.) Spengler's promotion of the *Weltwille* is not the only similarity in thought to Schopenhauer. Inherent in both of their works is their

Continuing this analogy of culture to organism, Spengler then laid out in his terms what he believed to be an observable, historically recurrent life cycle among culture, which he likened to the four seasons. Through birth and juvenility, we see the springtime of a culture, as it matures it enters summer and reaches its perfection in its autumn. Eventually, however, each culture enters into its winter season, seen by Spengler as its inevitable decline. This process, and particularly the stage of decline, became his main focus, and he believed that by examining the analogous process experienced by all cultures he was able to identify stages, each occurring contemporaneously within each separate life cycle, which would lead him to make observations and assertions about the supposed decline of the West and to further prophesy events which were yet to unfold. Flippant as this seems, as discussed in the last chapter, many of his prophecies seemed to have been fulfilled, leading to his becoming somewhat of a sage to political movements, harkening back to the perceived glorious days of a Third Reich Germany.

At first glance, when viewed side by side, these two thinkers seem diametrically opposed to one another; the former discusses culture from the point of view of a foundational murder from which various cultural expressions become manifest in terms of their social regulations and, most importantly, their religious system as defined by their myth. The latter observes culture through an organic lens which sees cultures, like biological entities, entering history from a vast historylessness through the strength of a collective cultural will-to-power. This will-to-power is spurred onwards via a cultural-specific Prime Symbol – an abstract representation of spatial extension which informs every facet of a culture – which, at first,

characteristic dualism which separates the world into an essence in itself and into a phenomenal reality (Will/Being, respectively, against Representation/Wakefulness) and their shared regard for the distinctive feature of man consisting in concept-building as opposed to the perception and understanding, that is, the spatial and causal arranging of phenomena, with which animals are already endowed with.

unifies and inspires a young culture and, later, becomes crystallised in hyper-rational guises which is the signal of a cultures decline.

As touched on in the previous two chapters, however, the nature of the subject matter which these two writers are engaging with naturally means that there is some overlap and, as we have seen, there seems to be some strong complementarity in some very important aspects of their respective theses, while also, unsurprisingly, some glaring contradictions. These will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter. Additionally, hovering over the theories of both writers is the spectre of an impending or at present occurring crisis, and not merely in terms of an economic crisis or any other limited analogue, but a genuine existential and apocalyptic crisis which has the potential to threaten the West's very existence.³ Since better understanding their respective crises is one of the major goals of their respective works, it is in the treatment of crisis where this essay seeks to be able to ascertain where these writers complement each other the most and what these complementarities may signify in a broader sense. More importantly, it is in determining where they differ regarding their respective views of crises and the reaction their philosophies prescribe to the crisis of our age that will be most valuable to us in understanding the deeper philosophical ramifications of the underlying philosophy which guides their work.

Since crisis acts as the moderator, in some way, to the corresponding thinkers, this chapter will be dedicated to better understanding, in general, the concept of crisis, its evolution of use and how this use functions in our contemporary culture. What this chapter aims at exhibiting

³ “The Apocalypse is not some invention. If we are without sacrifices, either we’re going to love each other or we’re going to die. We have no more protection against our own violence. Therefore, we are confronted with a choice: either we’re going to follow the rules of the Kingdom of God or the situation is going to get infinitely worse.” (David Cayley “The Scapegoat: The Ideas of René Girard, Part 3” Narrated by David Cayley. *Ideas*, CBC, March 10, 2016, audio, 14:25. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-scapegoat-the-ideas-of-ren%C3%A9-girard-part-3-1.3483382>)

is how the perception of crises in history fundamentally changed the approach to examining history by adding what Spengler believed Thucydides and his style of historical examination lacked: perspective.⁴

Crisis: An Exposition

*Men must fumble a while with error to separate it from truth, I think – as long as they don't seize the error hungrily because it has a pleasanter taste. Tell them too, my son, that when the time comes, as it will surely come, that not only priests but philosophers are in need of sanctuary.*⁵

The word crisis, in and of itself, presents us with a dilemma in commencing the above-mentioned analysis. It is a word that, while pregnant with a whole host of symbolic associations, remains, for the most part, enigmatic and philosophically obscure.

As anthropologist Janet Roitman adroitly states, “Crisis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today; it is mobilized as the defining category of our contemporary

⁴ “But what is absolutely hidden from Thucydides is perspective, the power of surveying the history of centuries, that which for us is implicit in the very conception of a historian. The fine pieces of Classical history-writing are invariably those which set forth matters within the political present of the writer, whereas for us it is the direct opposite, our historical masterpieces without exception being those which deal with a distant past. Thucydides would have broken down in handling even the Persian Wars, let alone the general history of Greece, while that of Egypt would have been utterly out of his reach. He, as well as Polybius and Tacitus (who like him were practical politicians), loses his sureness of eye from the moment when, in looking backwards, he encounters motive forces in any form that is unknown in his practical experience. For Polybius even the First Punic War, for Tacitus even the reign of Augustus, are inexplicable. As for Thucydides, his lack of historical feeling - in our sense of the phrase - is conclusively demonstrated on the very first page of his book by the astounding statement that before his time (about 400 B.C.) no events of importance had occurred in the world.” (Spengler, *Decline of the West Vol.1*, 8.)

⁵ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 232-233.

situation. The recent bibliography in the social sciences and popular press is vast; crisis texts are a veritable industry.”⁶

How does one precisely define crisis in the modern context? What does it mean to be in a state of crisis? What evolutions has the definition of crisis undergone throughout history, and what milieu allows a culture in the first place to gain enough distance from itself to label itself in just such a state? The most immediate purpose of this chapter will be to trace the origins and evolutions of this word in order for us to properly define the context in which we will use it.

As we will shortly find, particularly in the past century, the term *crisis* in its political and general social use has become an exceptional rhetorical tool with which to either galvanise popular support or, conversely, to express disapprobation for a rival and, periodically, in some rhetorical master strokes, to successfully achieve both ends simultaneously. Furthermore, in its modern use, it has become the sensationalist word du jour for those of an excessive bent who wish to bring to attention an agenda which, to their own personal judgement, is of ultimate importance, whether the haggard soap-box crier proclaiming the impending rapture, or a spokesperson for one of the most powerful military or political associations in the world. A proclaimed looming crisis forces one to pay attention on account of the inherited meaning of the term, and it is this inheritance that I will examine: the original context within which this word was employed and the original senses of its use. Doing so will allow us to observe its development but also, in part and perhaps more importantly, to preserve these meanings for our own use of the term as we continue our discussion of the philosophical and social crises implied by our two main thinkers.

⁶ Janet Roitman, “Crisis”. *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*. Issue 1 (2012). <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/crisis/#fnref-17-3>

To do this, we will go no further than Reinhart Koselleck's "Crisis," which was posthumously translated by Michaela W. Richter and published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in April of 2006.⁷ In this work, Koselleck traced the etymology of crisis and provided us with a history of its use and how it came to be associated with the definition it is now commonly identified with, that is, "a moment of truth."⁸

The Ancient Greek word *krisis* has its root in the word *krino*: to "separate" (part, divorce), to "choose," to "judge," to "decide"; as a means of "measuring oneself," to "quarrel," or to "fight".⁹ *Krisis* thus carried with it a large spectrum of meanings; however, in classical Greece this word had demarcated meanings within only three separate spheres of knowledge which would finally shape its definition centuries later: law, medicine and theology.¹⁰

To begin with, we see in the case of law, its origins, that crisis not only carried with it the meaning found in its root word, that of separation and divorce, but had an additional connotation, namely, that of "decision," in the sense of "reaching a crucial point that will tip the scales."¹¹ However, it also meant,

the additional sense of 'reaching a verdict or judgement, what today is meant by criticism (*Kritik*). Thus in classical Greek the subsequent separation into two domains

⁷ Reinhardt Koselleck, "Crisis" trans. Michaela Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (April, 2006), 357-400.

⁸ "Such moments of truth might be defined as turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology... As a category denoting a moment of truth...and despite presumptions that crisis does not imply, in itself, a definite direction of change, the term crisis signifies a diagnostic of the present; it implies a certain telos – that is, it is inevitably though most often implicitly directed toward a norm." (Roitman, "Crisis".)

⁹ Koselleck, "Crisis," 358.

¹⁰ Ibid., 357.

¹¹ Ibid., 359.

of meaning – that of a “subjective critique” and an “objective crisis” – were still covered by the same term. Both spheres were conceptually fused.¹²

According to Koselleck, the word crisis eventually achieved a high constitutional status through its eventual morphing into a synonym of “judgment,” “trial,” “legal decision” and, ultimately, “court,” which led to the binding of the individual citizen and the community. There was an implicit “for and against” present in the original meaning of the word in “a manner that already conceptually anticipated the appropriate judgement.”¹³

This meaning of crisis remained fairly uniform from its earliest known use in the fifth century B.C., remaining limited to the sphere of law and its relation to the political life of the citizen. This juridical meaning, however, was “fully taken over”¹⁴ and accorded an additional meaning in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old and New Testaments. Here, the “court of this world” as represented by the classical Greek juridical system is, as in the Jewish tradition, linked to God, who is at once and always both the ruler and judge of his people.¹⁵ Here, the act of judgement begins to carry the supposition of a salvation: an addition to the idea of crisis that would have lasting effects. In addition to this supposition of salvation via judgement would come the natural theological expectation of the apocalypse and its imminent arrival, heralding the first revelation of a “true justice.”¹⁶ The Christian conception of a Last Judgement encompassed all of humanity, both the righteous and unrighteous, the living and the dead, and would proceed indefinitely, as an ongoing trial until its eventual culmination at the end of times. Koselleck expands on this:

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

St John even goes beyond this certainty by announcing to the faithful that they, by obeying the word of God, have already achieved salvation. While the coming crisis remains a cosmic event, its outcome is already anticipated by the certainty of that redemption which grants eternal life. The tension resulting from the knowledge that because of Christ's Annunciation the Last Judgement is already here even though it is yet to come, created a new horizon of expectation that, theologically, qualifies future historical time. The Apocalypse, so to speak, has been anticipated in one's faith and hence is experienced as already present. Even while crisis remains open as a cosmic event, it is already taking place within one's conscience.¹⁷

There was, however, a third Greek use of the word crisis that preceded the judicial meaning of crisis, in the narrow sense, proceeding through the theological teachings of the Last Judgement which, while separated from the judicial overtones carried with it a very similar tone. This use also implied the necessity of a judgement, though in this case it was in relation to physically observable symptoms. What is being referred to here is, of course, the medical use of crisis. Originating in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, the collection of medical works associated with Hippocrates, and further fortified by the Roman physician Galen, the medical interpretation of crisis related to physical illness: on the one hand its observation, and on the other the subsequent judgement of its course. When a medical illness reached the crisis stage, a decision would be made as to whether the suffering patient was to live or to die. The possibility of making such a judgement required "properly identifying the beginning of an illness in order to predict how regular its development will be."¹⁸ Most important about this

¹⁷ Ibid., 360.

¹⁸ Ibid. Accordingly, if a crisis could lead to a full recovery to health it was considered a perfect crisis, if additional "purgings" were required, in the parlance of the time, the crisis remained imperfect as the possibility of a relapse remained open. See William Harry "An inquiry into the means of improving medical knowledge: By examining all those methods which have hindered, or increased its improvement in all past ages: To which is added, an explanation of the motion and action of fire, in and upon the human body, both in continuing

definition of crisis was its metaphorical transference into the realm of both social and political language when it underwent translation to Latin, wherein it gained a temporal and transitional sense which presupposed its leading to an eventual decision. According to Koselleck, “It indicates that point in time in which a decision is due but has not yet been rendered.”¹⁹ A decisive change happened here, according to Koselleck:

Since then the concept of crisis assumed a double meaning that has been preserved in social and political language. On the one hand, the objective condition, about the origins of which there may be scientific disagreements, depends on the judgmental criteria used to diagnose that condition. On the other hand, the concept of illness itself presupposes a state of health – however conceived – that is either to be restored again or which will, at a specified time, result in death.²⁰

Nonetheless, this concept of crisis remained limited in usage in its respective fields with a lack of documentary evidence indicating it wasn’t yet a central concept the way it seems to be in modernity.²¹ In the few cases of its use prior to its modern conveyance there nonetheless remained the foundational implications inherent in the three classical Greek terms,²² although Koselleck is quick to remind us that

the juridical and theological sense of ‘crisis’ clearly did not make their way into either the general lexica for the learned in the eighteenth century or into those for the

life, and in producing and curing diseases... (London: Printed for Hitch, C. and Hawes, 1761), 41

¹⁹ Koselleck, “Crisis,” 361.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ This could not happen until its translation into national languages with only a few mentions occurring in France and England during the sixteenth century. It wasn’t until the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century that this term began to permeate popular discourses, particularly in those of politics and parliament.

²² That of the necessity of a final judgement on a matter which has reached its critical point, the consequences of which could be dire resulting in either life or death, freedom or slavery or any other imaginable exclusive opposites.

educated in the nineteenth century [...] it appears that the primary point of departure for the expansion of the term into the political and economic sphere was the medical usage.²³

And this remained so as the term eventually entered common usage though never truly crystallised into a notion sufficiently clear to be used as a basic concept in spite of, or perhaps due to, its manifold meanings.²⁴ Outside of professional terminologies, the word was otherwise used only as a catchword; not to say that the term did not carry emotional states or moods, but these had not been clearly identified as integral to its conceptualisation.²⁵

Even so, “what appeared to be so peripheral in lexicography until that time, could indeed become an indicator of and contributor to a widespread sense of radical change from the second part of the eighteenth century on,”²⁶ and it is precisely here where – starting with Leibniz using the concept as a central point to analyse the emergence of the Russian empire during the Nordic War and, in so doing, recognising a “change of fundamental world – historical significance comparable only to the formation of Charlemagne’s empire”²⁷ – the concept now began to enter into the territory of a philosophy of history which gained more and more traction as the eighteenth century completed its course.

The entry of crisis into this domain, the main domain of our investigation, meant that the term was for the first time being applied as a way in which to discuss and assess history. In this domain it was again heavily infused with the religious connotation discussed above; however, at this stage, in an intellectual setting still embracing the Enlightenment within which it found itself, the term was applied in a post-theological mode. This would come to be

²³ Ibid., 365.

²⁴ Ibid., 367.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 362.

known as a philosophy of history. In fact, an argument could be here made that the official recognition of the task of writing a philosophy of history was exposed in the perception of critical, history-altering moments – crises – and in the identification of the way in which these altered the course of human events from that point onwards, although this line of reckoning falls outside the scope of this thesis.

Nonetheless, continuing its use of the medical metaphor as well as harnessing the associational power of the “Last Judgement” and the “Apocalypse,” which would remain omnipresent in the use of the term, meant that “the formation of crisis in the philosophy of history still leads to harsh dualistic alternatives.”²⁸ Most importantly, with its continued connotation with the party-politics, the term remains ambivalent where the sense of experiencing a crisis remains generalised but the diagnoses and prognoses vary with the user.²⁹

In Koselleck’s analysis,

the emphasis here is as much on substantive ideas about future goals as it is on the modes of interpreting them. The medical and theological origins of the term facilitate this task. From their respective perspectives, a crisis either reveals a situation may be unique but could also – as in the process of an illness – continue to recur. Or, analogous to the Last Judgement, a crisis is interpreted as involving a decision which, while unique, is above all final. Thereafter, everything will be different.³⁰

Within and between these limits we find a host of alternatives which, remaining rationally exclusionary, nonetheless “influence the characterisation of crisis both as entailing a possible structural recurrence and as absolutely unique.” In this way, says Koselleck, “the concept of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 370.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 371.

crisis can generalise the modern experience to such an extent that ‘crisis’ becomes a permanent concept of ‘history’.”³¹

This concept takes on its most popular form in two different variants: the first, à la Schiller, maintains that human history has been and is currently experiencing an ongoing crisis which, by its nature, cannot be decided from externalities such as the ex post facto pronouncements of historians but, rather, from all actions and non-actions of humanity in the present. This is captured when Schiller writes in his poem “Resignation” the line that would later become one of Hegel’s most famous aphorisms in his *Philosophy of Right*, “Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht” (“World History is the Last Judgement”). The poem depicts a soul come to the end of its life who now, in its own belief, stands at the threshold of the Day of Judgement. In having kept his or her faith and attended to his or her duties, despite the enmity of the world, this soul believes it is due its eternal reward. Unfortunately for this soul it is announced that the world has two flowers, each with their own worldly and exclusive reward, that of pleasure and of hope, essentially denying the prospect of a reward in a future life: here, hope has been its own reward even when abstaining from pleasure. This is not a “hope for hope’s sake” or a kind of secular version of Pascal’s wager;³² rather, in understanding history not as a judge but as offering the prospect of progress towards a society of justice,³³ we can avoid the pitfalls of inaction while naively hoping for our reward in a life to come. This is achieved by the forceful ending line: “The minutes thou neglectest, as they fade, are given back by no eternity!”³⁴ Here, hope and worldly action must cooperate in order to overcome the crisis threatening our very nature as we emerge from our “self-incurred

³¹ Ibid.

³² Michael Rosen, “Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht.” *In Internationalies Jahrbuch des deutschen Idealismus*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 18.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Friedrich Schiller, “Resignation,” PoemHunter.com, accessed March 14, 2018. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/resignation-10/>

immaturity,”³⁵ in Kant’s words. For this variant, crisis has become the fundamental mode with which to interpret historical time.

Early evidence of this focus on action is again found in the works of German jurist and social theorist Justus Moeser, whom Hegel included in his own autobiography, when Moeser states that, in order to make the populace great, it must be kept active and be “kept in such permanent crisis [...] as will make necessary to draw on all its powers and through the use of the same to increase the sum of the good in the world.”³⁶

The other conception of crisis within a philosophy of history maintains that a recurrent application of crisis, in and of itself relevant, nevertheless represents a historically unique transformation. The crisis becomes an epochal period after which nothing will remain the same. Whereas in the first variant, the crisis is itself the movement of history and our rising to the call of ongoing intellectual illumination, in the second we see that the crisis is in the process of being overcome – though when it happens, historically, we will have embarked on hitherto untraversed territory. Semantically, for Koselleck, the crisis concept contains four possibilities of interpretation as it pertains to historical time:

- 1) Following the medical-political-military use, “crisis” can mean that chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required.
- 2) In line with the theological promise of a future Last Day, “crisis” may be defined as a unique and final point, after which the quality of history will be changed forever.
- 3) Somewhat more removed from earlier medical or theological semantic spheres, are two new historical (or temporal) coinages. The first uses “crisis” as a permanent or

³⁵ Immanuel Kant and Allen Wood, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment? (1784).” Chapter. In *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, 11–22. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1996)

³⁶ Koselleck, “Crisis,” 371.

conditional category pointing to a critical situation that may constantly recur or else to situations in which decisions have momentous consequences.

4) The second new coinage uses “crisis” to indicate a historically immanent transitional phase. When this transition will occur and whether it leads to a worse or better condition depends on the specific diagnosis offered.³⁷

This attempt at a development of an individual concept applicable only to the present with which to capture a “new era that may have various temporal beginnings”³⁸ has, according to Koselleck, given “free scope to all sorts of wishes and anxieties, fears and hope. ‘Crisis’ becomes a structural signature of modernity.”³⁹ This is seen in the modern usage of the term, from Rousseau in *Emile* when he claims that a state of permanent crisis will proceed a century of revolutions to Thomas Paine’s commentary on the American War of Independence and the revolution inherent within that very real crisis.

However, even this modern philosophical usage does not fully capture the meaning of the word crisis in today’s milieu. These two writers, Rousseau and Paine, wrote in a period of revolution and saw the crisis as an enduring phenomenon that would only be overcome by the battery of concomitant revolutions happening throughout their particular epoch and resulting, hopefully, in a new period of social unity; however, its uses were still mostly relegated to the political-military spheres. The infrequency of the use of the word crisis at the time of their writing meant that it had not reached the global fever-pitch with which it is associated in our modern parlance. It is not until the nineteenth century that crisis truly comes into its own, not only as a catchword but also as a very real event requiring solemn attention.

³⁷ Ibid., 372.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Koselleck calls the time from the turn of nineteenth century onwards “the age of crisis”⁴⁰ due to the idea of the “global crisis” which “encompassed all spheres.”⁴¹ It is at this time that a crisis seems to emerge within all disciplines and all social spheres. There is talk of a “crisis of German philosophy” forwarded by Schlegel, a “literary crisis of Young Germany” via Brockhaus and a “universal theological crisis” spoken of by Bruno Bauer.⁴² The prognoses of crises continues with ministerial crises and chancellor crises arising in post-Bismarckian Prussia, so much so that even the use of the word crisis seems itself to be in crisis, as Maximilian Harder claims: “rumours [...] increasingly feed expectation of a political crisis. Such usage labels every disturbance in the balance of the body politic as a crisis.”⁴³ Despite this, it is in German Idealism that crisis and its subsequent critique finds its most willing adopters, particularly the heirs of German Idealists, the group known as the “Young Hegelians.”

German idealists naturally understood that the spirit (*Geist*) that drives reality would be victorious over any acute crisis; therefore, the concept of crisis plays a secondary role to this overarching and triumphant human spirit. With the Young Hegelians, however, the conceptual use of crisis became more predominant. These heirs of German Idealism, who developed a far more praxis- and action-oriented philosophy, believed that “critique is pushing for a decision, which historically understood as ‘crisis’, is already pre-programmed and prepared [...] Because it is able to see the direction of history, this critique is propelling the crisis [...] the concept of crisis thus remains within a philosophy of history calling for the execution of tendencies revealed through critique.”⁴⁴ In this way, “judging history correctly

⁴⁰ Ibid., 381.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 384.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 385.

will determine whether the problems of state, church and society demanding a decision can be solved in practise.”⁴⁵

In Frederick Copleston’s analysis of the transformation of Idealism in his *A History of Philosophy*, the work of Arnold Ruge, a Young Hegelian, serves to highlight this point of change from faith in the victory of *Geist* over any acute crisis to one emphasising historical critique followed by action, which also marked a shift of emphasis from logical, metaphysical and religious problems to problems of a social and political nature.⁴⁶ After shifting his focus from Aesthetics, in what could be considered Ruge’s stage of commitment to a stricter Hegelian orthodoxy, his interests began to focus on political and historical problems. Collaborating with the likes of Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer and even a young Karl Marx in a short-lived periodical, Ruge’s writings became more radical in tone, although he would later break with Marx personally and intellectually. Ruge supported Hegel’s “belief that history is a progressive advance towards the realisation of freedom, and that freedom is attained in the State, the creation of the rational General Will”;⁴⁷ however, he simultaneously “criticised Hegel for having given an interpretation of history which was closed to the future in the sense that it left no room for novelty.”⁴⁸ Copleston continues,

Hegel failed to understand the uniqueness and non-repeatable character of historical events, institutions and epochs ... The basic trouble with Hegel, in Ruge’s view, was that he derived the scheme of history from the system. We ought not to presuppose a rational scheme and then derive the pattern of history from it. If we do this, we inevitably end by justifying the actual state of affairs. Our task is rather that of making

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Fred Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Volume 7, Modern Philosophy: From the Post Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche*. (Doubleday: New York, 1994), 300.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 301.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

history rational, of bringing, for example, new institutions into being which will be more rational than those already in existence. In other words, in place of Hegel's predominantly speculative and theoretical attitude to history and to social and political life we need to substitute a practical and revolutionary attitude.⁴⁹

We see here how an attitude to history changes from Hegel to his successors. For the former, there was a primary concern with understanding history, with seeing the rational in the real. For the latter, however, we see the shift from understanding history to making history; understanding the world not for the sake of understanding alone, but in order to change it.⁵⁰ Therefore, in relation to our discussion on crisis, we see here how the focus shifts from merely understanding the myriad minor historical crises in relation to its overcoming by the *Geist* and the inevitable victory of rationality, to a critique of this history and the acceleration towards crises via human action in order to overcome them through human endeavour and will.

Being accurate in our judgement of history will allow us to determine whether the problems of the state and society in general demanding a decision can be solved in practice. As more thinkers began to understand history in the sense of being shaped by crises, decidedly eschatological components began to make their way into various writings claiming that Europe itself was on the brink of a precipitous fall if drastic action were not taken. However, for the most part, rather than prophesying the future state-of-affairs, most writers took the more balanced position of offering prognoses with two stark alternatives based on the study of earlier epochal crises. Other writers, such as Burkhardt, withheld the temptation of offering eschatological explanations and, rather, believed crises to be "more complex and multi-layered, even if they emerge erratically and suddenly [...] Crisis may be a permanent

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 302.

possibility in history, but reality creates so many moments of unexpected surprise as to make any typology of crisis relative.”⁵¹

Whatever the case may be, Koselleck makes note of one more important evolution in the conceptual use and understanding of crises. Where Burckhardt was unwilling to prophesy, Nietzsche’s readiness to do just that opened up a new, internal avenue to crisis when he answered the question he put forth to himself, namely, “Why am I a destiny?” Koselleck observes how the idea of the European crisis through Young Hegelianism and early Marxism was, via Nietzsche’s fusing of all diagnostic and prognostic strands of his philosophy together, reduced to one’s own person.⁵² “One day my name will be connected with the recollection of something enormous,” says Nietzsche, “with a crisis such as never existed on earth”⁵³ Here we see how the idea of crisis now even attaches itself to the individual in a moral and metaphysical sense.

The concept of crisis has become all-encompassing as it becomes associated with both external and now internal states relative to the individual. Indeed, it may be said, that an interesting kind of temporal narcissism is evoked in this new use of the concept of crisis. Now that the individual is also personally implicated, all crises, in essence, make themselves the focal point of one’s universe and existence within it. Whatever the crisis may be, the participants involved see themselves as personal harbingers of a new age, themselves taking part in and shaping the new history to come through their own heroic response. We see this plainly in the case of Nietzsche, who exalted his name being remembered henceforth, and this new narcissistic element adds extra credence to the words of the deft rhetoricians who would,

⁵¹ Koselleck, “Crisis,” 387.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 388.

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy: Nietzsche: The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols: And Other Writings*. ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 326.

consciously or unconsciously, manipulate and funnel this new hubristic energy toward their own ends. What was once relegated to the medical, judicial and political sphere has, by a mixture of historical analysis and prognosticating, been semantically and thematically extended to almost all spheres of life.

The metaphorical extension of the use of the word crisis into unrelated spheres and its becoming a catchword in the latter half of the eighteenth century helped to crystallise an association of loose definitions to the concept which gave it its overall modern character. Through its movement in the varying spheres the general *Gefühl* of the word seems by all accounts to have remained fairly unchanged despite its specific metaphorical use, and we can begin to understand how beyond its original employment it still maintains a situation, either temporally limited or recurrent, external with respect to the individual, which is reaching a critical stage requiring critique and a subsequent judgement – a judgement which will lead us, humanity or the individual, to one of two diametrically opposed and exclusive states. The crisis reveals a moment of truth.

It is this definition that we will peruse in all subsequent discussion regarding crisis, and it is this definition that most closely resembles the crises observable in the theses of both Spengler and Girard, with the former more or less denying the possibility of a paradigm shifting judgement and the latter proclaiming the absolute necessity of a judgement to a crisis which can truly be classified as global and all-encompassing. It is in their respective treatment of forthcoming crisis where we can begin to engage in a deeper discussion of the variance in their philosophies, and, while they will indeed provide a great complement for one another when analysing the onset of crisis and the movement of its escalation, it is in their diagnosis at its paroxysm that we will see the abyss which separates their thought and makes their philosophies incompatible.

Crisis: A Rhetorical Strategy

*What did the world weigh? It weighs, but is not weighed. Sometimes its scales are crooked ...
But fast and ruthless it keeps on weighing. It spills a lot of life that way, and sometimes a
little gold. And blindfolded, a king comes riding across the desert, with a set of crooked
scales, a pair of loaded dice. And upon the flags emblazoned – Vexilla Regis[...]⁵⁴*

I have above discussed in a little detail some of the dangers inherent in the use of a term as meaning-laden as crisis; therefore, before I embark on a bilateral investigation of an implied modern crisis, I submit a disclaimer regarding my use of the word *crisis* in opposition to the conceptual *crisis* used for rhetorical and political purposes. Kosselleck, in his essay, recognises that, since the nineteenth century, there has been “an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision.”⁵⁵ In this way, the term, apart from being somewhat of a catchphrase among the general public, has also come to be compulsively misused in the sense that “‘crisis’ is often used interchangeably with ‘unrest,’ ‘conflict,’ ‘revolution,’ and to describe vaguely disturbing moods or situations. Every one of such uses is ambivalent.”⁵⁶ Indeed, its definition has become so vague and all-inclusive that “The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favoured at a given moment.”⁵⁷ It is this ability to temporarily customise the concept of crisis in moments of uncertainty or general public distraction or disorientation that has allowed it to be employed by exceptional rhetoricians for political and bureaucratic gains. The crisis in and of itself – that is, the particular which requires a judgement and concurrent decision between two ultimate ends – is

⁵⁴ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 152.

⁵⁵ Kosselleck, “Crisis,” 397.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 399.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 399.

suspended in favour of harnessing the inherent loaded-ness of the term in order to galvanise popular opinion. Since its evolution into a catchphrase, Kosselleck understands that its interchangeability has rendered its use imprecise and vague.⁵⁸ It is quite possible, precisely due to its vagueness, that this term has become the favoured resort for political and social provocateurs.

Joel Litvin, in analysing the conflictual rhetoric between Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser in 1970s Australia, recognised that with an *a priori* case for the existence of a crisis established, the development of arguments in relation to strategies meant to present and circumvent the crisis shifted “from fact to judgement, the transformation of constitutional political issues into moral ones, and the arrangement of disparate events into a wholistic image.”⁵⁹ In this sense, both “Mr Fraser, like Mr Whitlam, attempted to connect actions and events with the unethical intentions of his opponent,”⁶⁰ based on the presupposition that the assumed political crisis was, moreover, of a moral nature, pitting the ethical fortitude of one man against the other as representative of the political parties they both headed. In expanding the rhetoric of a political crisis to include the morality of the opposing leaders, the two main actors are more easily able to mobilise the conflictual energies of their respective constituents to garner further support for their moral crusades. No longer is the public interested in the facts of constitutional political issues; rather, they have become invested in judgements of a moral nature, transforming a questionable bureaucratic crisis into an all-encompassing crisis of ideological morality. Litvin writes:

He [Fraser] spoke of the usurpation of power, of deceit, deception, conspiracy, evasions, half-truth, equivocation, and the destruction of the ethics and standards of

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Joel Litvin, “The rhetoric of crisis” *Politics*, 11:1 (1976), 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

parliamentary government. It was this collection of moral judgements which served to give cohesion to a series of disparate events. Each event might have been viewed as a mistake, an error in judgment, an unintentional blunder, but given the unity of moral condemnation, these events coalesced and emerged as powerful sources of moral argument.⁶¹

Litvin is correct in his assertion that both actors, Fraser and Whitlam, kindled and further stoked the fires of corruption once having exhorted the audience to accept the existence of a before-then unrecognised moral crisis leading to a further exhortation for its exorcism.⁶²

Whereas this rhetoric around crisis seems highly deceptive in its creation of a narrative of moral decadence for the furtherance of a political cause, no use of this rhetoric has approached the duplicity accounted to Mussolini and his January 3, 1925 discourse surrounding the murder of his political opponent Giacomo Matteotti. Italian politics was on the cusp of a crisis as defined by Kosselleck, as its status as a legitimate foundation from which to identify and execute political and social resolutions was teetering on the brink of illegitimacy, if not already there in the eyes of the wider public. In a single rhetorical masterstroke, Mussolini gathered all the energy of uncertainty enclosing this perceived crisis and, in essence, the energy surrounding the dead body of Matteotti, and rechannelled it

⁶¹ Ibid., 22.

⁶² There is a very interesting possible allusion here from the rhetorical strategy of naming a crisis hitherto unremarked or unknown to the analysis of *panic* found in Jean-Pierre Dupuy “Panic and the Paradoxes of the Social Order.” in *Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Petra Steinmair-Pösel (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005): 215-233. Although Dupuy centres his focus around panic in the economy, the same basic theory can be applied socially and politically. Dupuy states that panic “comes from within, not without” (218). In naming a crisis which may or may not have been real, the crisis can be unleashed in actuality, causing social panic. One cannot be extrinsic to the crisis once it has been named.

towards himself, portraying himself and Italy as the victim and, therefore, symbolising his body as the death of a liberal Italy.

Chiara Ferrari, in examining this incredible substitution of the victim from a Girardian perspective, notes how this rhetorical strategy allowed the speech to “construct its own conditions of self-validation .”⁶³ Furthermore, since violence is reciprocal and ever increasing in intensity upon reciprocation, Mussolini, in substituting his own body rhetorically for that of Matteotti’s, assumes the label of “victim” and is subsequently “reborn” as the leader and symbolic figurehead of a new, communally reunified fascist Italy. “This enactment,” writes Ferrari, “allowed Mussolini to allocate to himself the ‘properties’ of the *pharmakon* – the ‘substance’ which is at once dangerous, lethal and crisis provoking, and its exact opposite: beneficial, therapeutic, pacificatory – the poison/medicine. In other words, he was able to portray himself as “the living incarnation of the medium.”⁶⁴ If, as Ferrari asserts, Mussolini “began to die” the day Matteotti was killed, then through that “rhetorical staging” of a sacrificial ritual Mussolini was able to turn this “beginning to die” into his formal “beginning to live.”⁶⁵ This self-allocation as both victim and saviour is heavily in line with contemporary studies of fascist rhetoric which both “sacralises politics” and attempts to present itself as a political religion.⁶⁶ In so doing, Mussolini’s exchange broke the cycle of reciprocal violence which was to be forthcoming with the murder of Matteotti and essentially channelled violence away onto a victim which will not be avenged because it is similar to the original yet different; in this case, Mussolini himself. Mussolini became the lived embodiment of a new,

⁶³ Chiara Ferrari, *The Rhetoric of Violence and Sacrifice in Fascist Italy: Mussolini, Gadda, Vittorini*. (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 127.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

reborn and fascist Italy, and his body was its physical representation with his life, and subsequent death, intrinsically inseparable from the life of the Imperium reborn.

Although it seems that these preceding discussions seem to sit somewhat from the focus of this chapter, they serve to underline that the implied importance of the notion of crisis in contemporary thought has made us more aware of some of the dangers inherent in its application and allowed us the opportunity to more clearly examine and preserve the original sense of the word for our own employment. The two above examples of the rhetoric surrounding crisis is to differentiate this work from those that study crises using the loaded and pre-packaged modern use of crisis in order to make sweeping moral judgements about a perceived enemy or to sway popular opinion and discourse in the favour of a particular agenda. While its transformation into a panic-laden catchphrase has not exhausted the chances of possibility for a real, world-defining crisis, it has muddied the waters around which a conversation about crisis can be had. With this being said, I will continue to employ the term crisis and use it in the spirit which Kosselleck has identified through his comprehensive study of its etymology and literary history, keeping in mind Kosselleck's plea to his readers that its current, muddled mass of definitions should cause "scholars to weigh the concept carefully before adopting it in their own terminology."⁶⁷ Therefore, this thesis will not explicitly aim to make moral judgements nor use rhetorical strategies to further a political or social agenda – although such judgements are sometimes unavoidable.

Since Kosselleck has amalgamated the myriad loose definitions into one – that is, as a crucial turning point in which a judgement and accompanying decision must be made which will result in one exclusionary end as opposed to another – a position must, by necessity, be taken with regards to the opposite ends both Spengler and Girard seem to suggest. One may

⁶⁷ Kosselleck, "Crisis," 400.

be tempted to argue that another term could be employed other than crisis; however, in both distancing ourselves from the popular, catchphrase adaptation of crisis and, at the same time, analysing thinkers who each submit ideas proposing a crisis falling within the classical definition, we can attempt to reemploy the notion of crisis as a legitimate dialectical tool in order to further deepen our understanding of both thinkers' convictions regarding the state of late-modernity.

For the fact remains that there appears in the narratives of the history or life-cycles of human cultures presented by both thinker a particular point-of-no-return, a decisive paradigm shift within the culture wherein the relationship between the social mass and the world-out-there becomes fundamentally and irreversibly altered. What is this but the theoretical and historical observation of former crises and the proceeding *judgements and decisions* of the culture, whether conscious or unconscious, within which the decisive "crossroads" were arrived at and a course of action taken that, in turn, redefined the way in which the individuals within this culture viewed and navigated this world? While it can be said that both thinkers did not necessarily set out to analyse any form of crisis but, rather, aimed at presenting what they believed to be a simple, though theoretically complex, historical narrative based on the convictions of their studies, within each work there is the implicit suggestion of a direct change from one form of being-in-the-world and another diametrically opposed form, which is predicated on either, or perhaps both, the exacerbation or reduction of both particular and universal cultural practices and processes. It is this indirect implication that the following examination will pursue and unpack in order to view how each thinker deals with what they consider a till-now historical inevitability.

Chapter 4: Crisis, specifically in Girard and Spengler

The previous chapter served as a somewhat extended disclaimer on the use of crisis not only in this dissertation but in its general use from philosophical treatises to political debates, all the way to the morning newspaper and evening news. The suggestion was made via Kosselleck's sprawling study arguing that since its first use in Ancient Greece as a situation or bodily state requiring definitive adjudication following a necessary decision, we have, through its amalgamation into various intellectual, spiritual and creative movements, seen a change which could be described as fundamental. No longer is the term merely descriptive of a situation or state of events, but, more and more, especially with its employment in the burgeoning philosophy of history, it has become a term of provocation; within the process of finding meaning in historical crises, its effect has shifted away from the passive-descriptive found in 'traditional' historiography toward a more active rhetoric meant to arouse the action of the reader to whatever purpose the writer envisions. And while I accept that it is likely impossible to re-define crisis or to discharge it of its inherited connotations, for the purpose of this thesis I will aim at bypassing these associations. Of course, the irony is not lost on the fact that adding such a disclaimer oftentimes results in (un)intended exhortations, and that these may now be unavoidable, whether through (un)intentional incorporation of these elements or through the reader inferring a call-to-action as a result of the various impressions with which crisis is impregnated.

A Spenglerian crisis ferments

Tomorrow, a new prince shall rule. Men of understanding, men of science shall stand behind his throne, and the universe will come to know his might. His name is Truth. His empire shall encompass the Earth, and the mastery of Man over the Earth shall be renewed... And how will this come to pass?" He paused and lowered his voice. "In the same way all change comes to pass, I fear. And I am sorry it is so. It will come to pass by violence and upheaval, by flame and by fury for no change comes calmly over the world ... It will be so. We do not will it so.¹

We may now return to a consideration of two differently defined crises by two temporally and philosophically separated thinkers with divergent conclusions who, nonetheless, converge in certain important areas.

Spengler, borrowing from the works of Goethe, particularly his essay "*Geistesepochen*," details in his cyclical model of history the emergence and eventual decline and destruction of a living culture turned dead civilisation. In his application of an organicist design of culture, Spengler is able, as a supposedly detached observer, to diagnose the current decline and forthcoming death of the West. Since culture to Spengler is a dynamic living entity, his prognosticating can be likened to that of a physician who, through observation, ventures to offer a diagnosis for the ailment he is certain this organism is suffering. In the case of Spengler, his diagnostics correspond in an analogous fashion with the medical definition and use of crisis.

Spengler, having identified cultures corporally or, rather, as organisms sprouting up and out from the body of time, aims to detachedly scrutinise the current malady of Western modernity in juxtaposition with earlier cultures or, again, organisms, which have been

¹ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 211.

conceived from out of the beinglessness of time into a being-in-the-world and have grown into adolescence and eventual obsolete infirmity. In this way, Spengler, like a medical examiner, is able to view the turning point from a living culture to a dead civilisation, as outlined in Chapter Two, and to promptly assert whether the “illness” or “crisis” is perfect or imperfect, with all hitherto civilizational crises having themselves been imperfect – that is, recurrent, incurable and eventuating in death. Spengler is not trying to convince the reader of an impending crisis but, instead, is rendering to the reader the reality of a cultural crisis point already reached and actualised. Seen in this light, no “purging”, in the continuing spirit of the medical analogy, can relieve civilisation of its impending death; rather, Spengler famously offers some rare advice as to how one should treat the circumstance of their being born in such fatefully bleak times in his final, and excessively pessimistic work, *Man and Technics*:

We are born into this time and must bravely follow the path to the destined end. There is no other way. Our duty is to hold on to the lost position, without hope, without rescue, like that Roman soldier whose bones were found in front of a door in Pompeii, who, during the eruption of Vesuvius, died at his post because they forgot to relieve him. That is greatness. That is what it means to be a thoroughbred. The honorable end is the one thing that can *not* be taken from a man.²

It must be noted that there was a sharp turn away from the proclaimed, yet furtive optimism Spengler asserted in *Decline of the West* toward the overt pessimism displayed in his later work *Man and Technics*. In fact, Spengler had, by the time he wrote this ultimate work, only three years after the release of the second volume of *Decline*, become so

² Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics*. (Greenwood Press. Santa Barbara: California, 1976), 52.

pessimistic that he went so far as to write, “Only dreamers believe there is a way out. Optimism is *cowardice*.”³

What was this pessimism founded on and why did Spengler equate optimism with cowardice so vehemently? This will be explored further on, but for now let us consider Spengler’s detached historical observations and view of what befalls a culture whose crisis has passed and, in so doing, caused the death of that culture.

I have mentioned at length in a previous chapter that Spengler makes a clear distinction between a culture and a civilisation. The former represents virility and life, a dynamic becoming-in-the-world, whilst the latter represents reification and sterility, the thing-become. It is what happens between these two states, the period between autumn and winter, wherein Spengler identifies a culture in its death throes having reached its artistic and spiritual peak and, eventually, inauspiciously sinking into cessation. Leaning again on the medical metaphor of a crisis, which itself was commandeered by the theological notion of a final judgement, Spengler discerns, directly and indirectly, a particular inescapable turning point in the ‘health’ of a culture culminating in its unavoidable “death” as a civilisation. Again, Spengler makes no attempt in *Decline* to diagnose any sort of solution⁴ but merely acts as narrator for the fall. Before I can begin analysing how both Spengler’s and Girard’s crises can complement each other and act to fill in the blanks, so to speak, let us first understand what happens in the Spenglerian cultural crisis, that is, the turning point of a malady which ends in death.

Spengler describes the two oppositions in these terms that, by all accounts, provide us with far more questions than answers:

³ Ibid.

⁴ He does this much more fervently in succeeding writings.

Culture and Civilisation – the living body of a soul and the mummy of it. For Western existence the distinction lies at about the year 1800 – on the one side of that frontier life in fullness and sureness of itself, formed by growth from within, in one great interrupted evolution from Gothic childhood to Goethe and Napoleon, and on the other the autumnal, artificial, rootless life of our great cities, under forms fashioned by the intellect. Culture and Civilisation – the organism born of Mother Earth, and the mechanism proceeding from hardened fabric. Culture man lives inwards. Civilisation man outwards in space and amongst bodies and ‘facts.’ That which the one feels Destiny the other understands as a linkage of causes and effects, and thenceforward he is a materialist – in the sense of the word valid for, and only valid for, Civilisation – whether he wills it or no, and whether Buddhist, Stoic or Socialist doctrines wear the garb of religion or not[...] To look at the world, no longer from the heights as Aeschylus, Plato, Dante and Goethe did, but from the standpoint of oppressive actualities is *to exchange the bird’s perspective for the frog’s*. This exchange is a fair measure of the fall from Culture to Civilisation.⁵

Spengler goes on to distinguish between two forms of morale that define both states: the *tragic* and the *plebeian*. The former, belonging to a living culture, “knows and grasps the heaviness of being but it draws therefrom the feeling of pride that enables the burden to be borne.”⁶ The latter, belonging to a concretised civilisation, “made rather battle plans for the outmanoeuvring of destiny.”⁷ Most importantly, in relation to this discussion, Spengler makes the notable observation that “Each culture, further, *has its own mode of spiritual extinction*, which is that which follows of necessity from its life as a whole.”⁸ For Spengler, the driving

⁵ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. I*, 258-259.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 260

⁸ *Ibid.*

force behind this process is the suffocation by hyper-intellectualism of a flourishing “being” (*Dasein*) with the coming of a “waking-consciousness” (*Wachsein*); the former is “plantlike-cosmic, Being heavy with Destiny, blood, sex, possess an immemorial mastery and keep it. They are Life,”⁹ whereas the latter waking-consciousness, a “tension and extension” in comparison to “beat and destiny”¹⁰ works “not to serve [life], but to rule; moreover, it believes that it does rule, for one of the most determined claims put forward by the human spirit is its claim to possess power over the body, over ‘nature’.”¹¹ More thoroughly, it is in human understanding detached from animal sensation, or more simply, *thought*, in which Spengler locates the opposition between *Dasein* and *Wachsein*, and he presents these opposed states in this way:

The development of theoretical thought within the human waking consciousness gives rise to a kind of activity that makes inevitable a fresh conflict – that between Being (existence) and Waking Being (waking consciousness). The animal microcosm, in which existence and consciousness are joined in a self-evident unity of living, knows of consciousness *only as the servant* of existence. The animal “lives” simply and does not reflect upon life [...] understanding, then, when it becomes interlocked with speech, promptly forms a *concept* of thought and with it a *counter-concept* of life, and in the end it distinguishes life as it is from that which it might be. Instead of straight, uncomplicated living, we have the antithesis represented in the phrase ‘thought and action’. That which is not possible at all in the beasts becomes in every man not merely a possibility, but a fact and in the end an alternative. The entire history of mature humanity with all its phenomena has been formed by it, and the higher the

⁹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 2*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

form that a Culture takes, the more fully this opposition dominates the significant moments of its conscious being.¹²

Though this opposition is elaborated on and presented in a more nuanced way throughout his work, it is dependable to say that this opposition between lived being and detached thought is that which centrally underpins the movement between cultural life and civilizational death, at least to Spengler. In cultural beginnings, Spengler asserts that thought, freshly emancipated from sensed instinct, but not yet abstract in make-up as it is in its later variations, forms for the culture a religious world picture and it is this object “upon which the understanding begins to operate critically.”¹³ Here thought, still subservient to its religion, which itself is a product of the placental Ur-Symbol discussed in chapter two, is not *used* abstractedly to categorise lived action in terms of cause and effect but, in being deeply connected to one’s “blood and soil,” acts in an unconscious accordance to the will of a culture as defined by its Ur-Symbol. In fact, most of Spengler’s discourse revolves around his oscillation between rapturous descriptions of pre-civilizational *Dasein* versus the feeble post-cultural *Wachsein* and its effects on all the various spheres of life, from something as innocuous as dance to spheres as vital as ethics and law. The following are just a few examples of this oscillation of thought.

In his ruminations on a culture still inhabited with *soul*, Spengler provides the example of the act of settled living. In a young culture it is “the *symbolic shape of the farmhouse*, which in the disposition of the rooms and in every line of external form tells us about the blood of its inhabitants.”¹⁴ The agent, here, is “plant-like” and thrusts his roots into his home soil.¹⁵ It

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 2*, 61.

¹⁵ Here and in the following quote of Spengler’s there are some indirect references to the work of Ferdinand Toennies, his philosophy of history, and his concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Like Spengler, Toennies rejects the conventional division of modern history

is “*property* in the most sacred sense of the word.”¹⁶ For Spengler this act rejuvenates and heightens the agents’ intimacy for his soil. This extends further to the town surrounding the peasant cottage: “What his cottage is to the peasant, that the town is to the Culture man.”¹⁷

In fact, Spengler goes on to make the claim that it is a “conclusive fact – yet one hitherto never appreciated – that all great Cultures are town Cultures.”¹⁸ “World history is the history of civic man,”¹⁹ says Spengler, who goes on to recount the “miracle” that is the birth of a soul from within the town, a mass soul of a uniquely new form from which, once awakened, a visible body is formed. For it is not the size of a town that matters to Spengler, but whether it has a soul. This is represented by the “earthbound” and “plantwise cosmic” architecture which *grows out* of the ground, earnest and big with destiny, such as the Doric column of Hellenic Greece, the pyramids of the Egyptian culture and the Gothic cathedral of the newly born Germano-Catholic Europe. Conversely, in a civilisation, the agent, as opposed to being connected to one’s soil and soul-feeling, lives as the nomad – “the immemorially old roots of

into antiquity, the middle ages and the modern age. Particular antiquities represent for Toennies, similarly to Spengler, a “closed circle of cultural development” although, to be sure, not as rigidly separated as in Spengler’s scheme. (Werner Cahnman, *Ferdinand Toennies: A New Evaluation*. Leiden: Brill Archive, 1973: 114) Additionally, there abound tinges of Romanticism, though not as pronounced as Spengler’s, with regard to a sharp distinction between *Gemeinschaft*, “an association that is internal, organic, private, spontaneous,” whose paradigm is the *communio tutios vitae* of marriage, and *Gesellschaft*, “something external, public, mechanical, formal or legalistic,” a rational coming together for ends that, ultimately, remain individual.” (Eugene Kamenka “Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft”. *Political Science*, 17 no. 1. March, 1965: 3. Doi: [10.1177/003231876501700101](https://doi.org/10.1177/003231876501700101)). “The secret of the Gemeinschaft lies in the household and the concept of kinship, in the ties of blood, friendship and neighbourhood. The secret of the Gesellschaft lies in commerce and the conception of contract, its ties are the ties created by the transaction between (abstract) persons, its measure for all things is money” (Ibid.). Whereas Toennies did not subscribe to the cultural and political pessimism of Spengler, his ideas were nonetheless also championed by those with the Romantic and widespread longing for *Gemeinschaft*.

¹⁶ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 2*, 61.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Being are dried up in the stone masses of its cities. And the free intellect – fateful word! – appears like a flame, mounts splendid into the air and pitiably dies.”²⁰

Practically the same formula is followed in his analysis of a culture’s art form compared to the arts and crafts of civilisation. In fact, it was in his discussion of art in which he found another complement to his argument against the lineal-progressive view of history. For Spengler, art, from varying cultures, was its own self-actualised and isolated species:

I have already, in the earliest pages of this work, exposed the shallowness of the notion of a linear progression of “mankind” through the stages of “ancient,” “medieval” and “modern,” a notion that has made us blind to the true history and structure of higher Cultures. The history of art is a conspicuous case in point. Having assumed as self-evident the existence of a number of constant and well-defined provinces of art, one proceeded to order the history of these several provinces according to the – equally self-evident – scheme of ancient-medieval-modern, to the exclusion, of course, of Indian and East Asiatic Art, of the art of Axum and Saba, of the Sassanids and of Russia, which if not omitted altogether were at best relegated to appendices [...] Even today we are still taught that the Renaissance was a rebirth of the Classical. And the conclusion was drawn that it is possible and right to take up arts that are found weak or even dead (in this respect the present is a veritable battlefield) and set them going again by conscious reformation program or forced “revival” [...] Of the Pyramid style *nothing* passed over into the Doric. *Nothing* connects the Classical temple with the basilica of the Middle East, for the mere taking over of the Classical column of a structural member, though to a superficial observer it seems a fact of first importance, weighs no more in reality than Goethe’s

²⁰ Ibid., 63.

employment of the old mythology in the “Classical Walpurgis Night” scene of “Faust.”[...] And that a great art may die not merely with the Culture but within it, we may see from the fate of music in the Classical world.²¹

Besides this digression, the premise for Spengler remains the same. In the cultural stage, art is of determinate necessity. Man or woman – in so far as they are a microcosm with respect to the macrocosm of the environment around them, and in so far that one is *phenomenal* and belongs to the fabric of actuality²² – must sum up within themselves the intelligibility possessed by the force of symbolism with which they are surrounded. The external signification of this internalisation is expressed in the art form of that particular culture:

the result of this is that Culture and Culture differ very greatly in their selection and formation of their humane arts. While Gluck expresses the woe of Armida by a melody combined with drear gnawing tones in the instrumental accompaniment, the same is achieved in Pergamene sculptures by making every muscle speak.²³

From the unconscious realisation of preferred form, to the predominant colour palette surrounding the culture,²⁴ art, like all other cultural manifestations, including religion, myth, law and mathematics, are products of the related Prime Symbol, a living language bespeaking

²¹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol.1*, 163-164.

²² Ibid., 189.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “The most significant use of dusky green as the color [sic] of destiny is Grunewald’s. The indescribable power of space in his *nights* is equaled [sic] only by Rembrandt’s. And the thought suggests itself here, is it possible to say that his bluish green, the color in which the interior of a great cathedral is so often clothed, is the specifically *Catholic* color? – it being understood that we mean by ‘Catholic’ strictly the Faustian Christianity (with the Eucharist as its center) that was founded in the Lateran Council of 1215 and fulfilled in the Council of Trent” (Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol.1*, 182).

the external expression of a lived internalisation of domestic symbols. Art in a civilizational stage, on the other hand, becomes “truly a dead language”.²⁵

What do we possess today as “art”? A faked music, filled with artificial noisiness of massed instruments; a raked painting, full of idiotic, exotic and show card effects, that every ten years or so concocts out of the form wealth of millennia some new “style” which is in fact no style at all since everyone does as he pleases; a lying plastic that steals from Assyria, Egypt and Mexico indifferently. Yet this and only this, the taste of the “man of the world,” can be accepted as the expression and sign of the age; everything else, everything that “sticks to” old ideals, is for provincial consumption [...] Instead of its symbolism being honoured and obeyed, its mummy, its legacies of perfected forms, are put into the pot anyhow, and recast in wholly inorganic forms [...] Pictures and fabrics, verses and vessels, furniture, dramas and musical compositions – all is patternwork. We cease to be able to date anything within centuries, let alone decades, by the language of its ornamentation. So it has been in the Last Act of all Cultures.²⁶

The same formula applied here is applied throughout Spengler’s dissertation and can be applied in his work. Each culture, in its youth, expresses the external symbolism presented to it through its Prime Symbol, established, essentially, through the surrounding geography. Euclidean Geometry, according to Spengler, was only possible, and fully discernible, in Hellenic Greece, whose Prime Symbol was the static. Leibniz’s infinitesimal calculus was only possible from within the Faustian culture, whose Prime Symbol was that of, unsurprisingly, infinite space. As an architectural form, the garden is to the Chinese culture

²⁵ Ibid., 216.

²⁶ Ibid., 216-217.

what the domed roof is to the Magian. The statue is to the Greek what the portrait is to the Faustian.

In the vast variety of culture-forms and world-views, when it comes to the purported cultural decline into civilisation, the fates of all cultures are relegated into an undifferentiated mass of predestined patterns. Where Spengler spends an inordinate amount of time propounding the individuality of each cultural soul – the uniqueness of its world-view and the breadth of its lived experience – his tone becomes caustic and uniform once his explanations extend into the passing of these cultures into the civilizational stage. What was singular and exemplary in a time of growth becomes predictable and typical through the stages of decline. All of Spengler's exaltations regarding the oneness of cultures is juxtaposed with lamentations respecting their universal fate, for it is in their decline that each culture reveals to Spengler the common destiny awaiting each and all. Gone are the reflections on the individual originations ascribed to self-contained cultures, replaced, instead, by all-applicable generalisations without concerns for distinguishing between cultures.

Naturally, as above, Spengler makes sure to highlight that each culture experiences its own version of death, much in the way that each experiences its ascent; however, since all cultural output after having crossed the threshold into the civilisation stage is essentially plastic and inorganic, no outstanding distinctions can be made except for a change in the names and dates of those key people and cultures involved. The decline of the Egyptian Empire is interchangeable with the decline of China. The political epoch experienced by Rameses II is contemporaneous and interchangeable with that of Emperor Ming-Ti. A break appears where that which was being uniquely created with and alongside destiny ends up falling victim to this self-same destiny which, by all accounts, seems to erase all cultural distinctions as each ends up a rootless and inorganic mass of stone with nomadic inhabitants, both spatially and intellectually.

Remembering that the modern usage of an historical crisis championed by the Young Hegelians implies a breaking with a mode of living no longer rationally available – although in Spengler’s account the choice of the succeeding mode through critique and action is unavailable due to his fervent determinism – Spengler recognises that there is indeed an unavoidable cultural rupture which precludes any attempt at avoidance. Again, while he never employs the concept of crisis, this dramatic fracturing displays to us the possibly unconscious inheritance of this particular mode of thinking which had become so predominant in Spengler’s Europe and had, perhaps, come to influence his work in ways of which he was unaware. However, as we will now briefly come to see, Spengler’s crisis, explicit or not, also contains in its framework an unavoidable violence. It is not only the fact that it contains violence that is of note, but that the very nature of violence itself also undergoes an irreversible evolution – or perhaps devolution, as Spengler would come to admit, once the rupture originating in the cultural and existential crisis has occurred.

In understanding what precedes this culturally new yet historically recurring form of violence which appears at the climax of what I am labelling a Spenglerian crisis – that is, the radical shift from all culture-forms to civilizational-forms – we will be better placed to analyse what constitutes this new violence that makes itself visible in all-encompassing civil wars which come to overrun the former organic community.

In the second chapter discussing Spengler, we were made privy to the general sentiment of just such a change and unavoidable break. Hyper-intellectualisation through pure reason predominates; older culture-forms such as religion and myth are usurped by analogous humanistic/socialist movements; *joie de vivre* is no longer felt by citizens who lapse into *détente* while genuine *play* is replaced by a paradigm of *panem et circenses*. While this aspect of Spengler’s writing is alarming as it is, the discussion regarding the inescapable onset of a period of drastic and brutal state-wide violence is most disquieting. I discussed the role of

violence in the cultural stage and the historical importance of its effects as a steam-valve through socially condoned acts of hierarchical inversion and controlled violence. Yet the violence that appears in the civilizational stage – though Spengler makes no attempt at discriminating between cultural heroic violence and all-encompassing civilizational violence – seems to possess a very different sentiment than its cultural counterpart. In his *Decline*, Spengler waxes lyrical on the splendour of the war general, the man who possesses cosmic-beat and is literally a harbinger and living representative of destiny. His actions on the battlefield, representative of the nobility of his culture, and his commands during war, are the manifestations of a living destiny writing itself into history. In a political essay written and released between volumes one and two of his *Decline*, entitled “Prussianism and Socialism,” an essay which gained him additional notoriety, Spengler continues with his acclamations regarding the splendour of war:

Politics is the highest and most powerful dimension of all historical existence. World history is the history of states; the history of states is the history of wars. Ideas, when they press for decisions, assume the form of political units: countries, peoples, or parties. They must be fought over not with words but with weapons. Economic warfare becomes military warfare between countries or within countries. Religious associations such as Jewry and Islam, Huguenots and Mormons, constitute themselves as countries when it becomes a matter of their continued existence or their success. Everything that proceeds from the innermost soul to become flesh or fleshly creation demands a sacrifice of flesh in return. Ideas that have become blood demand blood. War is the eternal pattern of higher human existence, and countries exist for war’s sake; they are signs of readiness for war.²⁷

²⁷ Oswald Spengler, *Prussianism and Socialism*. Radical Nationalism in Australia. (2008). Accessed 27th July 2018. <http://home.alphalink.com.au/~radnat/spengler/prussianism.html>

Here the debt Spengler owes to Nietzsche cannot be overstated. The heroic warrior returns in Spengler's writing as the living avatar for the movement of cultural-political history. In *Man and Technic*, Spengler famously asserts "Der Mensch ist ein Raubtier," that is, man is a beast of prey. As A.R. Chisholm observes in his reading of Spengler's *Decline* in the 1935 *Australian Quarterly*, Spengler's cognisance of man as predator is, for him, the sole reason that man is capable of producing a culture at all:

Being a beast of prey he has no fear, he does not have to spend his time watching or smelling out the dangers of this environment; he can even neglect the immediate environment, being its master, and look beyond; and so his lordship grows, more particularly because his eye gives him a greater horizon than that of the other carnivora. All great cultures are made by races who keep these 'noble' qualities, as he calls them, of the beast of prey, so different from qualities of cunning and policies of fear. In all this we can hear the voice of Nietzsche proclaiming through the mouth of Spengler the glory of the blonde Beast.²⁸

Blonde Beast aside, Spengler, like Nietzsche, believes that the aristocratic warrior class, those who embody the characteristics of nobility for that particular culture, feel deep within them the resounding pulse of blood and of soil and, more importantly, a living destiny. Spengler writes, "Practically everything that has been achieved in world history, in war and in that continuation of war by intellectual means that we call politics;²⁹ in all successful

²⁸ Alan R. Chisholm, "Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West." *The Australian Quarterly* 7, no. 27 (1935): 39-40.

²⁹ There are obvious parallels here with von Clausewitz's aphorism that "War is the continuation of politics by other means," who himself analyses what he considers an unbridgeable divide between older, long-standing traditions of war and the modern, total war of which he stood at the precipice.

diplomacy, tactics, strategy; in the competition of states or social classes or parties; has been the product of living unities that found themselves ‘in form’.”³⁰

For Spengler, the noble who “plows in the forenoon and jousts in the afternoon” is *the man as history*, the expression of “History of the high kind,”³¹ in which the criterion for the individual’s relative importance in relation to different events is the “pulse of this stream of being.”³² In his conception of cultural history, vassal wars and the like are “preeminently the form in which the history of Early periods fulfils itself, and thenceforth the nobility has the fate of the Culture in hand. With a creative force that is all the more impressive because it is silent, Being is brought into form and ‘condition.’ The pulse in the blood is heightened and confirmed, *and for good.*”³³

Here we understand the point, of which Spengler continually reminds us, with regards to a young culture’s efforts in war. The springtime of a culture newly birthed from its mother soil coincides with the birth of a primary nobility who, with the pulse and beat of living blood and destiny within it, confirms its arrival on the stage of history through its engagement in violent wars with subordinate persons or countries. In Spengler’s view this is *for the good* of the culture, as it is in the surety of its actions and the convictions with which it fights its battles that this burgeoning forth into the historical is announced and confirmed. This idea is not new in the Nietzschean school of thought; that a cultural aristocracy, feeling the pulse of history and life within, sets out to conquer others not for the sake of defeating an enemy but in order to defeat the weakness within oneself is resonant of the Master archetype.

³⁰ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 233.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

But what happens to Spengler's account of violence and war in the post-cultural stage, that is, the civilizational? Does humanity's relationship to violence through war change in this stage or does it still function as a siphon through which one can display courage and take responsibility for one's own destiny? On this, Spengler is unusually silent. War, like all other pursuits in a culture that has found its being withered in the stone megalopolis, has essentially become a plastic simulacrum of what it once represented and is void of its heroic-animating force, that is, a culture's destiny. In his extremely abbreviated mentioning of post-cultural violence, one finds no trace of the military aggrandisement nor of the celebration of the individuals deemed noble and strong enough to carry the burden of a historical objective. Violence through war, like art, becomes mere craft rather than a dynamic extension of a culture's creative and heroic output. How can one understand this change in attitude towards war which Spengler himself seems to avoid approaching? Let us first understand Spengler's account with regards to the former in order for us to begin an attempt at interpretation for the latter.

In a drastic change in tone from the quasi-mysticism that permeates the discussions concerning neonatal cultural Ur-Symbols and its Will-to-being, when discussing the unavoidable civilisational all-encompassing violence endemic to this period, Spengler becomes, much like the nature he chastises, economical and unfeeling. In Spengler's formula, it is in the civilizational period that creativity unconsciously externalised through one's connection to blood and spirit gives way to mere craftsmanship. All the great cultural formations, which in the formative stages are the blind burgeoning forth of a culture-form are, in the civilizational paradigm of hyper-intellectualisation, mere tools of instrumental reason. This is true for all cultural spheres from the artistic and celebratory, to the political and military. For Spengler, politics, money and, uniquely in our time, the Fourth Estate, a

term borrowed from Edmund Burke,³⁴ become the locus of civilizational administration; he calls this “the politics of mind and money.”³⁵ Spengler qualifies this intuition through his careful study of the final centuries of the Roman Imperium which, as mentioned previously, is, according to him, the closest analogue to our current period of decline. Here, the Roman Senate, the successor of its Hellenic counterpart, once the seat of an aristocratic nobility whose pronouncements were “so self-evident to the life held in their spell, that politics [...] is limited to plain action with the cadre of the given forms,”³⁶ become merely the “battleground of party candidates, an arena ready for the intervention of money, and [...] of ever bigger and bigger money.”³⁷ Money, particularly in the realm of politics, when possessed in abundance by a particular senator, is “turned into a *force*, and its quantity determines the intensity of its working influence.”³⁸ In essence, it becomes the new tool for the will-to-power operating in those who have access to it and the ability to effectively harness it. Politics, in a paradigm of hyper-intellectualism, does not proceed self-evidently but, rather, is manufactured by those with money to influence popularity rather than to represent a particular culture. Politics, as a battleground, influences the masses of the megalopolis by

devices many of which to us would be repellent and almost intolerable, such as rehearsed sob effects and the rending of garments; by shameless flattery of the audience, fantastic lies about opponents; by the employment of brilliant phrases and resounding cadenzas (of which there came to be a perfect repertory for this place and purpose) by games and presents; by threats and blows; but, above all, by money.³⁹

³⁴ Julianne Schultz, *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media*. (Cambridge: United Kingdom. Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 324.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

The democratic ethos itself is here to blame, according to Spengler, who writes that it is foredoomed “by necessity to take such forms when it reaches maturity.”⁴⁰

However, the democratic ethos, for Spengler, is a result of the acceleration towards violent crisis occurring during this historical-cultural stage for, as I have just mentioned, a huge shift occurs in Western (Faustian) culture, which occurs analogously in all cultures. It is in the transition from Napoleonism, the last of the great aristocrat generals, to Caesarism, in which we find the last stage of a civilisation prior to its complete decline into historylessness and into the *fellah* existence mentioned in the previous chapter. But in true Spenglerian fashion, he recognises in Faustian culture something unique which sets it further apart from other cultures hitherto having experienced and succumbed to these inevitable cultural-historical forces.

Whereas this break down of true “in-form” politics into rehearsed devices is part and parcel of this process, in the Faustian culture, through its striving for the infinite via its Ur-Symbol, this form of politicising takes on a new and almost universal form through the Faustian development *par excellence*, namely, the printing press. “The printed book,” says Spengler, “is an emblem of temporal, the Press of spatial, infinity.”⁴¹ Like the Roman citizen

⁴⁰ Ibid., 325. In Werner Stark, *The Sociology of Religion: A study of Christendom, Volume I*. (Cox & Wyman:London. 1966), Stark echoes this point when he traces the evolution of religion from its primary form - its sacred variant - to its secondary form, that is, the socio-political democratic variant turned proletarian. He traces the burgeoning forth of this second form in Western Christendom to the democratic revolution of 1789 and its champions Comte and Rousseau, precisely the same place that Spengler traces the fall of Western culture into its civilisational form with Napoleon, the last axis of lived history. For Stark, the democratic revolutions could only evolve further into what he terms the proletariat revolution and its finality in the communism of the United Socialist State of Russia – a form of ethnocentric messianism, to borrow Stark’s term (222). This is a thread of thought we will engage with in deeper terms further on in this thesis when we enter into our argument against Spengler and his neo-Nietzschean train of thought, but it is important to keep this evolution of cultural spirituality via religion turned political messianism in mind as we continue our discussion of Spengler’s account of cultural history, particularly in relation to violence and war.

⁴¹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 2*, 295.

equally enthralled and repulsed by the feigned drama of late-Roman politics who is besieged by slogans and half-truths, who cannot distinguish fact from falsity, and who plays mere witness to a struggle of moneyed interests, so too does the modern Faustian stand in relation to those in power who seek to retain or those not-yet in power who seek to usurp. However, with the coming of the printing press, a stark line is drawn in the comparison of the late-Classical, or Apollinian, to the Faustian:

Now, whereas the Classical, and supremely the Forum of Rome, drew the mass of the people together as a visible body in order to compel it to make that use of its rights which was desired of it, the “contemporary” English-American politics have created *through the press* a forcefield [*sic*] of worldwide intellectual and financial tensions in which every individual unconsciously takes up the place allotted to him, so that he must think, will, and act as a ruling personality somewhere or other [...] ⁴²

When the form of a culture

ceases to possess the attractiveness of a young ideal that will summon men to the barricades, unparliamentary methods of attaining an object without (an even in spite of) the ballot box will make their appearance [...] Neither the megapolitan masses nor the strong individuals have any real respect for this form without depth or past, and when the discovery is made that is only a form, it has already become a mark and shadow. ⁴³

What does this all mean in terms of violence? Does this cultural-historic shift away from *politics as war and war as history* to *war as politics and politics as money* change the nature of violence or, perhaps more accurately, change the way we utilise it? Is there, somewhere in

⁴² Ibid., 326.

⁴³ Ibid., 297.

this process, a change in the function of violence, or does this represent a return of violence in a new guise? Spengler does not begin to approach such specific questions with regards to this phenomenon, though he expresses how critical its effects are. According to Spengler, “with this enters the age of gigantic conflicts, in which we find ourselves today. It is the *transition from Napoleonism to Caesarism*, a general phase of evolution which occupies at least two centuries and can be shown to exist in all the Cultures.”⁴⁴ While this period is undeniably the overture to an irredeemable and abiding historical formlessness, it is also, for Spengler, the dawning of the real day of the great individual:

No era confronts its mankind so distinctly with the alternative of *great form* or *great individual powers* as this “Period of Contending States”. In the degree in which the nations cease to be politically in “condition,” in that degree possibilities open up for the energetic private person who means to be politically creative, who will have power at any price, and who as a phenomenon of force becomes the Destiny of an entire people or Culture.⁴⁵

Spengler calls this the “accident of the great fact men,”⁴⁶ and these clashing campaigns of formless, a-historical, moneyed cults-of-personality, along with the divisive rhetoric and a “deafening drum fire of theses, catchwords, standpoints, scenes [...]”⁴⁷ eventually cause the “masses of the megalopolis” to marshal and mobilise themselves into rival units under their prospective moneyed representative which, in turn, leads to a period of great civil strife. Again, in Western civilisation, through the easy availability of information-sharing

⁴⁴ Ibid., 297.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 326.

technology, in Spengler's time the printing press, this takes on a more critical dimension, as Spengler writes in one of his more famous quotes:

Today we live so cowed under the bombardment of this intellectual artillery that hardly anyone can attain to the inward detachment that is required for a clear view of the monstrous drama. The will-to-power operating under a pure democratic disguise has finished off its masterpiece so well that the object's sense of freedom is actually flattered by the most thoroughgoing enslavement that has ever existed.⁴⁸

Hyper-rationalism, whose "religion is criticism and whose numina are not deities but concepts,"⁴⁹ concentrates on the world of facts wherein "truths are simply *means*, effective insofar as they dominate spirits and therefore determine actions."⁵⁰ This critical spirit gives rise to a democratisation which, in turn, gives way to the above process of contending moneyed powers, which eventually leads to a state of perpetual civil war.

This is a condensed summary, but the rationale remains. This state of perpetual civil war, for Spengler, is merely a "general phase of evolution"⁵¹ towards the penultimate state of culture: that of Caesarism. The nature of the violence in this "general phase of evolution," however, remains untouched by Spengler. For Spengler, the real, overarching *Gefühl* of this period is chaos, of which violence is merely its physical externalisation. The numerous violent revolutions of this period, categorised as "blind outbreaks of uprooted megalopolitan masses,"⁵² serve no function nor have they ever attained even the possibility of an aim. Despite an observed change on how violence as the engine of war no longer carries any culturally vivifying power, for Spengler, this period merely represents the "*historical fact* of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 327.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 286.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 297.

⁵² Ibid., 299.

an accelerated demolition of ancient forms that leaves the path clear for Caesarism.”⁵³ Again, here it is worth repeating that in the deterministic vision of Spengler this is merely the fate of all cultures; however, if we are to apply our understanding of crisis in the context of Spengler’s work, what Spengler is discussing, as will be argued, is not simply the movement of history as he would have us believe, but the recurring historical appearance of a real crisis which essentially reveals a cultural point-of-no-return wherein the succeeding experience of being-in-the-world is radically changed and the lived experience preceding this breach is inaccessible. Furthermore, this change is united with a violence that is itself of a culturally new form, appearing only once these analogous cultural-historical changes take place.

What is of most interest to us as we continue our discussion is whether a choice precedes the eventual judgement. Nonetheless, continuing Spengler’s fatalist analysis, the breakdown of an “in-form” culture precipitates the destruction of all high forms of cultural creation. Art becomes a chaotic arts and crafts which clings desperately to Golden Age forms while simultaneously desecrating them through bastardised, rational concepts. Architecture and city planning becomes a chaotic mass of faceless buildings which tend upwards to fit in as many dwellers as possible rather than to carry on them the architectural form of the springtime culture, such as the domed Magian (Arabic) Mosque or the Gothic Cathedral. Politics becomes a chaos of rhetorical and dramatic devices; the government championed by the in-form cultural-aristocracy becomes the chaos of the non-Estate Democracy; and war, once violence used as a means to propagate the superiority of the springtime culture and announce its burgeoning forth into world history, becomes the aimless, exacerbated externalisation of both an external socio-political chaos and the cadaveric spasm of a people whose internal life has been emptied of its providence. During this time, Spengler says, the cry for reconciliation

⁵³ Ibid.

arises; however, these lose themselves in the “moving crush of facts”⁵⁴ such that “the history of these times is no longer an intellectual match of wits in elegant forms for pluses and minuses, from which either side can withdraw when it pleases. The alternatives now are to stand fast or to go under – there is no middle course.”⁵⁵ As the chaos ensues, the curtains are pulled aside for the final stage of a culture – the stage of Caesarism – and in explaining this stage I will fully defer to Spengler and his own words:

By the term “Caesarism” I mean that kind of government which, irrespective of any constitutional formulation that it may have, is in its inward self a return to thorough formlessness [...] At the beginning, where the Civilisation is developing to full bloom (today), there stands the miracle of the Cosmopolis, the great petrifact, a symbol of the formless – vast, splendid, spreading in insolence. It draws within itself the being-streams of the now impotent countryside, human masses that are wafted as dunes from one to another flow like loose sand into the chinks of the stone. Here money and intellect celebrate their greatest and their last triumphs. It is the most artificial, the cleverest phenomenon manifested in the light world of human eyes – uncanny, “too good to be true,” standing already almost beyond the possibilities of cosmic formation ... The eternal cosmic pulse has finally overcome the intellectual tensions of a few centuries. In the form of democracy, money has won. There has been a period in which politics were almost its preserve. But as soon as it has destroyed the old orders of the Culture, the chaos give forth a new and overpowering factor that penetrates to the very elementals of becoming – the Caesar men [...] *The Imperial Age in every Culture alike signifies the end of the politics of mind and money.*⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid., 306.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 307-308.

The emergence of a crisis in Spengler and Girard

When the world was in darkness and wretchedness, it could believe in perfection and yearn for it. But when the world became bright with reason and riches, it began to sense the narrowness of the needles eye, and that rankled for a world no longer willing to believe or yearn. Well, they were going to destroy it again, were they – this garden Earth, civilised and knowing, to be torn apart again that Man might hope again in wretched darkness.⁵⁷

As mentioned above, in trying to unpack and position Spengler's thoughts on violence one is struck by the lack of deeper analysis when it comes to this seemingly important stage in the history of a culture. Here, by all accounts, humanity stands on the precipice between order – through a tradition and *weltanschauung* steeped in blood and soil – and chaos: a formless, aimless, historylessness. In referring this investigation back to our analysis of crisis above, one is also struck by what seems to be a contradiction in Spengler's writing. On the one hand for Spengler the history of a culture must give way to the "moving crush of facts" despite any of its ambitions to avoid destruction, whilst on the other hand Spengler is clearly letting his readers know that during this time of contending states a culture is also confronted with an alternative – that of great form or that of great individual powers. Does this not better conform to our precise definition of crisis above – an impending event requiring a critical and final judgement of which one of two diametrically opposed and exclusive states will materialise – particularly now that a choice seems to be revealing itself underneath Spengler's hard determinism? Why has Spengler included an allowance for choice at the precise moment when choice under an ambivalent, uncompromising historical destiny is anathema to his entire writing? This question is currently, perhaps, the most difficult to answer, and simpler questions regarding his views on violence can serve to help us unpack

⁵⁷ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 285.

his more general conclusions. But again, even with war and violence in this chaotic stage, we find a lack of any real attempt at an analysis as to why at this stage, when order becomes chaos, violence breaks out within a culture which had currently been held together by bonds of blood and soil and an unspoken assurance of its place in history. Is there a difference between the violence of the “in-form” general and the violence of the formless masses? If the former serves an important cultural function, why is the implication there that the latter serves none? And, lastly, does violence, in and of itself, serve any function whatsoever apart from being a mere ancillary to war?

If we were to remain within the Spenglerian world-view, this series of questions could be brushed aside with deference. If the civilisation phase is an epoch represented exclusively by the introduction of dead, formless, over-rationalised concepts, conducive to the annihilation of previous culture forms, and any innovation or creation within this era is merely a plastic recapitulation of a petrified style, then violence and war would, naturally, fall under this same systematisation, rendering it essentially useless and orderless. However, perhaps Spengler is closer to the truth of violence than we are giving him credit for, for it is in another of his earlier works, again the essay “Prussianism and Socialism,” in which we find this typical exaltation of violence from Spengler preceded by the acknowledgement or at least recognition of its proximity to sacrifice. Spengler writes:

Everything that proceeds from the innermost soul to become flesh or fleshly creation demands a sacrifice of flesh in return. Ideas that have become blood demand blood. War is the eternal pattern of higher human existence, and countries exist for war's sake; they are signs of readiness for war. And even if a tired and blood-drained humanity desired to do away with war, like the citizens of the Classical world during its final centuries, like the Indians and Chinese of today, it would merely exchange its

role of war-wager for that of the object about and with which others would wage war.⁵⁸

So, which is it for Spengler? Is the violence of the period of contending states, these “catastrophes of blood and terror,”⁵⁹ a pattern of higher human existence or merely the outburst of a herd of people lost in historylessness? It is a very difficult question to answer, particularly when Spengler himself oscillates between treating it with glorification and disinterested observation. As mentioned previously, however, all signs here lead to some sort of crisis, although this word is barely uttered by Spengler,⁶⁰ who sees no crisis in what is essentially the ambivalent and constant becoming of destiny. Nevertheless, one cannot seem to shake off the constant sense of a world-on-edge; a world in which, at least for a moment,

⁵⁸ Spengler, “Prussianism and Socialism”.

⁵⁹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. II, 306.

⁶⁰ In fact, this word seems to have been uttered sparingly in Spengler’s work. Nonetheless, his use of the word provides us with a great clue as to the entire *raison d’être* of this great and divisive work. In the Introduction to the first volume of *The Decline of the West*, Spengler states that a morphological and analogical view of history will allow us to better create what he called his “philosophy of the future” and, hopefully, understand what he calls a great crisis of his then present. Spengler writes: “This is what has to be viewed, and viewed not with the eyes of the partisan, the ideologue, the up-to-date novelist, not from this or that ‘standpoint,’ but in a high, time-free perspective embracing whole millenniums of historical world-forms, if we are really to comprehend the great crisis of the present.” (34). Like most of his contemporaries, it was the threat of the Great War that was seen as the great historical crisis of their present. On this, Spengler writes “In 1911, I proposed to myself to put together some broad considerations on the political phenomena of the day and their possible developments. At that time the World-War appeared to me both as imminent and also as the inevitable outward manifestation of the historical crisis, and my endeavour was to comprehend it from an examination of the spirit of the preceding centuries — not years”. (36). Later, in his pessimistic stage, Spengler seems to have given up on Crises and their concomitant judgements and decisions altogether when he states, “And in every conference and every paper the word ‘crisis’ is bandied about in connexion [*sic*] with any passing disturbance of the peace. And thus we deceive ourselves, blind to the fact that we have here one of those incalculable great catastrophes that are the normal form in which history takes its major turns.” Here, it seems, his fatalism had become absolute as his studies entered their own twilight.

the world-as-culture teeters between life and death; between, as Spengler says, great form or great individuals.

Whereas Spengler is evasive in using the word crisis and, for the most part, in approaching violence in the spirit of deeper analysis, Girard uses crisis almost haphazardly and commits most of his life's work to unfolding the deep, foundational mystery of violence. Where one was nonchalant in the face of the coming apocalypse in violence, the other spent a large portion of his career pleading to his readers and contemporaries of the need for immediate action. There is a marked attitudinal contrast here, and this contrast in views speaks volumes regarding the contrasting teleology of each thinker, respectively. Before discussing how the philosophy of each thinker naturally affects their world-view and attitudes towards the apocalypse, we must first better understand Girard's consideration of what the crisis of the modern age, if any, looks like.

That an apocalypse is imminent, pending a crisis of universal proportions, is constituent to the evolution of Girard's thought leading up to the later development of his conceptual framework. Where with Spengler the idea of a crisis moves almost hidden under the more bombastic claims of his writing, like the black water of a river under a sheet of thin ice, one need not look far in Girard's writing to find repeated use of the word crisis. For Girard, however, the crisis is not conveyed in the obvious historical proofs of failing cultural "beat" and "out-of-form" political demise – although, as we will see, there may be some very valuable and thought-provoking overlap here. Rather, for Girard, the macro crisis, so to speak, overarching all of these micro crises of a particular cultural history is of a mimetic and, ultimately, sacrificial nature. Unlike Spengler, we must not assume a crisis and extrapolate our proofs; rather, Girard provides strong evidence early and often, favourably shortening our analysis in comparison to Spengler's. In our first chapter we discussed the theory of Girard and the way in which mimetic rivalry between individuals or groups spreads

within the community, pulling others in like the centre of a whirlpool, eventually becoming all-pervasive and infinitely escalatory: a war of all against all. We also saw how this rivalry turned existential threat is placated through an unconscious mechanism of scapegoating and sacrifice, serving to re-unite the once-warring parties and bring a catharsis conducive to religious birth, its sustenance and greater social and cultural unity. Like Spengler, who, although seemingly deploring mechanical methodologies, presented us with a mechanical pattern involving the birth and death of cultures, here Girard has also presented us with an anthropological mechanism to which we blindly and unconsciously revert whenever the crisis reaches its paroxysm. So why make use of the word crisis within the context of a mechanism which does not present itself as a choice when choice or judgement, as we have discovered, are key components of a crisis that is, again, a choice between two absolutes each leading toward an ultimate end? If Spengler, perhaps rightly, avoids using this word in his *schema* of cultural decline, why does Girard insist on its repetition? Is there not a general theme between the two thinkers of a gradual falling away of cultural forms? Of a one-way journey towards a violence that is all encompassing and culture-destroying? Has Girard, not overtly, stated that a culture's failure in violence is irredeemable and irreversible once violence has been stripped of the sacred? These questions themselves lead us toward the discussion we have been aiming at since the beginning; however, prior to embarking on that path, this presently positive meeting between two seemingly mechanistic and divergent historical suppositions provides us with an opportunity at further bolstering each theory through the strengths of the other; one historically and politically disposed, the other literary and anthropological, though both fiercely philosophical.

What is lacking in the general oeuvre of Girard's work and his post-death mimetic theory in my opinion is what Girard himself laments in his lattermost work *Battling to the End* – his most historical work by far – and that is his conviction that a “mimetic history needs to be

written” so that it may “help us understand what is at stake in our own time.”⁶¹ While this dissertation makes no claim to complete such a monumental task, the resonance of this conviction of Girard’s was far too strong to ignore, and while Girard wrote this sentence in response to Francois Furet, I believe I have found in Spengler a worthy dance partner, so to speak, with which to begin this dance – that is, until they eventual begin to step on each other’s feet, as we will later see. While the mimetic theory thus far has been applied to important disciplinary fields, such as literature, anthropology, philosophy and psychology (just to name a few), it seems that when it comes to an account of greater world history, such as that attempted by a Fukuyama or Toynbee, mimetic theory functions merely as an insert. What one finds, however, in Spengler, who feverishly sought to separate his principle positions from all preceding historians, is what mimetic theory usually provides to other disciplines, that is, a causal analysis and explanation of observed phenomena such as the analysis of sacrifice in relation to hominization. Here, whilst trying to avoid liberties, Spengler’s theory can act as the insert to the gaps in Girardian analysis when it comes to the real historical-political effects of a desacralized, intensified longing for violence and, ultimately, sacrifice. To be sure, Girard has gone to extreme lengths to account for the cultural effects of violence-turned-mundane and the way in which, failing a serendipitous aftermath to sacrifice, this sacred breakdown must, by all accounts, corrupt and influence the institutions of which sacred violence was progenitor and foundation. As discussed previously, Girard is unflinching in his assertion that not only is this unintended and unconscious contract with violence formative of all the cultural institutions of a society, but it is the essential ingredient to our passing the threshold from bestial nature to humanity. Therefore, if this dramatic thrust into humanity and culture is the result of successive effects of a founding

⁶¹ René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. trans. Mary Baker. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 40.

murder and its remembrance through myth and ritual, then it can only lead one to conclude that the exhaustion of this cohesive force and the sapping of its influence must reasonably lead to the petrification and decline of humanity and culture.⁶² Could this be the crisis that Spengler refused to mention? Here already we are starting to see some theoretical overlap, even if their respective methodologies are bordering on antithetical. But it is where one lacks that the other can provide the wadding to create something akin to a whole.

⁶² It must be remarked here that this implication is, for the most part, applicable to pre-state societies in Girard's framework. As we will come to see, this idea of an exhaustion of the efficacious aftermath of sacrifice, when extended to Christianised societies, takes on a wholly new meaning due to the revelation of the Gospels, according to Girard.

Chapter 5: Girard and Spengler

Towards a Spenglerian and Girardian unity

Let us now imagine what a synthesis between the two thinkers could possibly look like if we, for the moment, choose to ignore the divisive elements of their respective theories. Let us for the moment defer the discussion regarding the divergences of our two main thinkers and, in an act of fancy, envision the two thinkers acting in the capacity of one mind under a singular theory – the one observing history, as Spengler does; the other analysing cultural anthropology, as Girard does – with each aiming to support the other. We will find that, when it comes to a general outline of history, the two thinkers would seem to complement each other excepting two major steps in the lifecycle of a culture, that is, the precise moment of a culture's birth out of history, and the underlying engine of decline. For the sake of indulgence, let us see what this synthesis could look like.

Girard's interpretation of the beginning of culture, in comparison to Spengler's, is more parsimonious. Quite simply, "In the beginning was the fall." As mentioned previously, in Girard's interpretation of cultural history, hominization begins with a founding murder. In the midst of a mimetic crisis, upon unconsciously "discovering" the scapegoat mechanism, proto-humanity sacrificed a singular victim or group from which a new and immediate peace springs. Upon reflection on this peace, the symbolic onslaught on proto-humanity, the association between the murdered victim's presence and the plague of violence, the revelation of their death as a heralding of social unity births in this new culture the capacity for thought of a new kind wherein, under the auspices of this plague-bringer-turned-deity, all necessary cultural conventions from prohibitions to sacred rituals are developed. These conventions are then maintained through the intermittent re-enactment of said crisis and solution, and, through this, revivification of order is further repeated. For Girard there was no

paradisiacal interlude between creation and humanity's expulsion from Eden; rather, for him, our "birth" occurred in earnest *ex post facto* a murder in frenzied delirium. In this scheme of Girard's there is no place for Spengler's ambiguous narration of the coming of humanity.

In Spengler's case, following a hypothetical interlude of the differentiation of the plant and animal, the beat of cosmic cycles, the freedom of movement of the microcosm within a macrocosm, the two cyclic organs of cosmic existence – that is, the blood system and sex organs – we finally come to the human. The human, endowed with the "supreme sense,"¹ sight, becomes aware of their own consciousness through the "where and how?" which, through a new spatial perception, opens up a vista beyond the "when and wherefore?" of the plant's existence:

In the world of this light – not the light which science has deduced indirectly by the aid of mental concepts, themselves derived from visions ("theory" in the Greek sense) – it comes to pass that seeing, human herds wander upon the face of this little earth star, and that circumstances of light – the full southern flood over Egypt and Mexico, the greyness of the north – contribute to the determination of their entire life. It is for his eye that man develops the magic of his architecture, wherein the constructional elements given by touch are restated in relations generated by light. Religion, art, thought, have all arisen for light's sake, and all differentiations reduce to the one point of whether it is the bodily eye or the mind's eye that is addressed.²

While this, in my assessment, is an overestimation of the formative power derived from sight alone, it nonetheless points to a period of human activity, pre-cultural or not, which exists prior to Girard's account of hominization through calamity. There is, however, another

¹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 4.

² Ibid.

proponent of mimetic theory who takes umbrage at Girard's pessimistic account of human emergence. One of Girard's finer points, discussed earlier, states that archaic man appeals to an imaginary, fabricated transcendent omnipotence because of *meconnaissance* – “the violence of the process in which they are engaged inevitably prevents them from finding out what is really going on”³ – which is in and of itself invaluable to the process as the mechanism can only produce its beneficial effects on the very basis that it remain misunderstood. Nevertheless, according to Cesareo Bandera,

there is a huge gap, a long distance between not knowing what is going on and seeing the victim as the embodiment of an invisible, omnipotent power beyond the reach of man, of the group, the horde. How could this creature over the face of the earth “explain” to himself this radically new phenomenon, in terms of an immensely powerful and invisible transcendence, *unless he already had that mental possibility in his mind?* If he had no notion whatsoever about God, how in the world could he possibly imagine a false god, a purely violent god? For that is what the “transcendent omnipotence” really is. Therefore, is this purely imaginary “transcendent omnipotence” not an argument in favour [...] of a prelapsarian stage?⁴

Could Bandera's position support Spengler's view that, in his immersion in a light-world of spatiality and duration, “before he has begun to think abstractly, primitive man forms for himself a religious world picture, and this is the object upon which the understanding begins to operate critically”?⁵ Bandera continues with a very important point in the context of our conversation. Rather than imagining the subjective feeling of this new, but already human

³ Cesáreo Bandera, *A Refuge of Lies*. (Michigan State University Press: Michigan, 2013), 11 [my italics].

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 9.

creature attempting to understand the “immeasurable vastness”⁶ of Spengler’s “world of light,”⁷ Bandera is far more interested in the amazement through imagination of our early ancestors. In Bandera’s words, “[...] this is the first time that a creature, a product of this world sees it as true, as real, and therefore sees the spiritual dimension of the physical world out there.”⁸ However, it is at this stage of realisation or revelation that Bandera imagines a double pronged “something” occurring:

[...] something extraordinarily important and consequential may have happened also inside the world, and not only inside the new creature at that revealing moment. For the truth is not an accident of the world out there. It belongs to the essence of that world as it truly reveals itself to a human mind, not to a creature biologically trapped in a web of hypermimetic relations, unable, by definition, to see the reality of the world out there as such, as real. But perhaps it was also at that revealing moment that the germ of the problem, the beginning of the fall, seeped in, mixed with the very amazement of those eyes.⁹

What could that “something” be which seems to Bandera to disrupt the revelries of a “new creature” to whom the “essence of the world” is truly revealing itself? Bandera claims that whatever this “something” is plants the seed for the beginning of the fall and, in turning its gaze to their fellow creatures in equal amazement of the world-out-there, hypermimeticism takes root in this self-same creature. Bandera writes: “For they were looking not only at the world out there, but also [...] at their fellow creatures. And the question is, how could this

⁶ Bandera, *Refuge of Lies*, 13.

⁷ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 5.

⁸ Bandera, *Refuge of Lies*, 13.

⁹ Ibid.

amazement in the very face of truth – that is to say, of that which is *truly* out there – not be also at the root of the “hypermimeticism” of the new creature?’¹⁰

That particular “something” remains a mystery; however, it does not preclude speculation and, in the context of this thesis, it is possible that both Spengler and Girard come to the same conclusion: if there were a prelapsarian stage in humanity it was nonetheless un conducive to the creation of culture, which is the main focus of Girard’s work, and “something” irrevocably caused this new creature to “fall” into the vice of mimetic rivalry, which in turn catapulted the human into history via the arrival of a homogenous and independent culture.

Of course, for both Spengler and Girard there is no room for such a heavenly Edenic period within recorded human history; the former, as explained, believes that all spiritual “truths” are epiphanies revealed by the “light-world” and no *actual* God of Creation exists but those that the early cultures invent in line with their Prime Symbol; the latter, on the other hand, believes no true period of recorded human activity could have preceded the mimetic crisis, subsequent *meconnaissance*, and the physical and mental structures that followed.

For Spengler and Girard, however, there is one particular formative experience of proto-humanity that for both acts as the catapult of this creature into what Spengler calls the “fact-world”: the dead body for the former, and the murdered victim for the latter. Naturally, there is a vast empirical difference between the experience of merely witnessing a dead body compared to witnessing the brutal murder of one by your own hands and those of your fellows; however, again there is an overlap and a rationale that can link these two together. Furthermore, it can and will be argued that the one – in a sense acting as that “something” of Bandera which plants the seed of hypermimeticism – has the possibility of leading directly to the other, giving even more credence to his assertion, against Girard’s, that there did indeed

¹⁰ Ibid.

exist a stage of life before the fall and before a sacrificial crisis caused our expulsion into history and culture.

As we have just explained, in Spengler's schema early man and woman, endowed with the "supreme sense" and consciousness in a "light-world" of spatiality and temporality are overawed at both the magnificence and scope of the world-out-there. This new creature inhabiting the world develops for him or herself a religious picture based on the sheer mystery surrounding them. Spengler writes:

For, although man is a thinking being, it is very far from the fact that his being consists in thinking. This is a difference that the born subtilizer fails to grasp. The aim of thought is called "truth", and truths are "established" – i.e. brought out of the living impalpability of the light world into the form of concepts and assigned permanently to places in a system, which means a kind of intellectual space. Truths are absolute and eternal – i.e. they have nothing more to do with life.¹¹

However, in a nod to his mentor, Nietzsche, Spengler is then quick to denounce the futility of this thought as he believes that one of the greatest achievements of Nietzsche is that he confronted the problem of the *value* of truth.¹² Rather, says Spengler, there is a great distance between fanciful "truths" and hard fact.

For an animal, not truths, but only facts exist. Here is the difference between practical and theoretical understanding. Facts and truths differ as time and space, destiny and causality. A fact addresses itself to the whole waking consciousness which imagines it can detach itself from being. Actual life, history, knows only facts; life experience and knowledge of men deal only in facts. The active man who does and wills and fights,

¹¹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*

daily measuring himself against the power of facts, looks down upon mere truths as unimportant¹³

The hard fact against which the active man must daily measure himself is, according to Spengler, the recognition of death. Any notion of an eternal truth “out there” is quickly subjugated by the waking consciousness, which does not focus on fixed and abiding abstractions but, rather, concentrates on the “actual” world, which is in a state of constant change and flux. It must be said at this point that Spengler’s account of this waking consciousness in a world whose chief identification is constant change harkens back to Spengler’s love for Heraclitus about whom Spengler wrote a failed doctoral thesis.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is obvious in reading his work the huge debt he pays to this enigmatic thinker and the way in which the Heraclitean Logos permeates all his work. There will be much more on this in the coming chapter; however, Spengler calls this confrontation of the human being with the world of waking consciousness within which all understanding consciousness has gathered itself into “*the problem of motion.*” In encountering this problem, all free and abstract thought breaks down and the human is once again reminded of a reality in which they recognise that the microcosm, in this case themselves, is completely dependent on the cosmic. The greatest attestation to this mystery of motion is, naturally, death:

That we do not merely live but *know* about “living” is a consequence of our bodily existence in the light. But the beast knows only life, not death. Were we pure plantlike beings, we should die unconscious of dying, for to feel death and to die would be identical [...] Only when understanding has become, through language, detached from

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ This thesis was entitled “*The Metaphysical Fundamental Thought in Heraclitean Philosophy*”.

visual awareness and pure, does death appear to man as the great enigma of the light world about him.¹⁵

“All mythology and all natural science has arisen out of man’s wonder in the presence of the mystery of motion,”¹⁶ says Spengler; but there seems to be a gap here. Although Spengler goes on to say that, faced with the immensity of the “fact” of death, the ideas of guilt and punishment, of existence as penance, salvation and a life beyond and even the origination of “the outlook which we possess as being men and not beasts,”¹⁷ there is no indication as to why all of this would lead to the birth of culture and the cavalcade of institutions, prohibitions and rituals which follow. Rather, Spengler *again* does precisely what he seems to abhor and relies on abstractions derived from mere thought divorced from the waking consciousness of the fact world. Finding no discernible reason why death should lead to the inauguration of these institutions, Spengler falls back on his abstract Ur-Symbols, which, functioning as the force upon which the Will is driving towards, urges humans to forsake the peace of a history-less nature in favour of enculturation. In our hypothetical prelapsarian stage above, there is no reason why our Edenic forbears would view the death of an animal or the confrontation therewith as anything but the will of something beyond or external to them. Moreover, in his *Decline*, Spengler passes over the fact which he seems only to grasp in his ultimately pessimistic work *Man and Technic*, that is, the role of violence, blood and sacrifice. For in Spengler’s scheme, the human is merely an observer who innocently discovers and reacts rather than an agent who is actively involved in the process of death. Spengler, in his romanticisation of the early culture-man/woman cannot foresee that, while one looks upon death, there may indeed be another of his or her fellows whose gaze is

¹⁵ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

planted squarely on them; a gaze moving from one living body to a dead one, and, finally, back upon themselves.

It is in light of this that Girard's account becomes more attractive to us for, rather than relying on an abstract concept like an all-governing symbol which, somehow, unconsciously becomes a communal will based on the outlying and surrounding geography, Girard's ideas are planted in the "fact-world" of a cultural anthropology. Where Spengler views humanity's inactive observation of death in a world of motion as the creator of mythology and sciences, Girard sees humanity's very actions in relation to death, through violence, as their catalyst. If Girard is incorrect in his assertion that there existed no prelapsarian stage of humanity, as proposed by Bandera, he is certainly on to something ground-breaking in his insistence of the role of human sacrifice as the true harbinger of culture. Contra Spengler, Girard vehemently states that the pre-cultural human does not simply wonder innocently about the "mysteries of nature" as Spengler would have us believe; rather, "in reality magical thought does not originate in disinterested curiosity. It is usually the last resort in a time of disaster and provides principally a system of accusation. It is always the *other* who plays the role of the sorcerer and acts in an unnatural fashion to harm his neighbour."¹⁸ For Girard, as expressed in the first chapter, the function of laws, myths, religious taboos and rituals does not simply arise from some abstraction of thought brought forth through the meanderings of a people being driven by some equally abstract symbol of which these self-same people are unconscious of; rather, they are the direct consequence of an explicit and overt action on the part of these people – namely, the diversion of a communal mass of violent energy onto a single victim eventuating in their murder, all of which is preceded by the conflict which is inherent in our preponderance for mimetic desire and reciprocation.

¹⁸ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 53.

So far, this chapter has been concerned with exploring how far we could entertain a synthesis between Girard and Spengler, and some preparatory work above was necessary in order to place each thinker “on the same page,” so to speak, with regard to the historical narrative being considered. Apart from their divisive views on cultural beginnings, which we have just explored, I have argued for a “complementarity” existing between the two and a host of possible theoretical overlaps that could help create a unified theory which takes the research and conclusions of both thinkers into account. In my introduction it was mentioned that the purpose of this, in the end, was to create a single narrative with which to both explore the way in which the theories of each thinker can complement and add to the other but also how, out of this unity, we can better identify the points of disunity that become very apparent in the respective superimposition. By identifying the points of harmony, which seem many, it is in the points of contention in which the opposition of their theories becomes pronounced, and a discussion on these and their effects can, in effect, reveal their opposing prescriptions.

Therefore, in the spirit of my earlier attempt at a unitary synthesis between Spengler and Girard, and for the sake of a clear “narrative,” let us amalgamate these two views of cultural beginnings into one useable whole with which we can continue our exploration of the framework of a united Spenglerian and Girardian philosophy of history in order to further understand their response to crisis. Be reminded that this will be written dramatically in the spirit of Spengler and his bombastic style and, in respect of the fact that this is a combination of two thinkers, I will be moving seamlessly from one set of respective theories to the other.

An experimental historical narrative via a theoretical synthesis of Spengler and Girard

In the beginning was *not* the fall; rather, in the beginning was creation – a creation in which, through the Darwinian scheme, forms of life were brought out of the darkness and into the light-world through the evolution of the “supreme sense” – sight. From out of this host of creatures living in a purely sensual world, there came in to being a singular creature the like of which the world had never seen who, immersed in this world-of-light, did something no other animal had hitherto been capable of; it thought, and was conscious of this fact. The Edenic period began and a spiritual dimension was opened up to the creature as they were now exposed to the truth of the world-out-there.¹⁹ However, during this short interlude of revelry, “something” also threw this creature out of its revelries and into the world-as-fact; death made its appearance, in some unknown shape or form. This creature, with its mind in the heavens but its senses and instinct chained in the physical world, intuited consciously or unconsciously that it too was bound bodily to this fact-world where life precedes death. This amazement, in the very face of the truth of that which is *truly* out there, became the root of hypermimeticism. This creature, like all the creatures of the world bound bodily to their sensual instincts, began to desire – what, we cannot know; however, from his or her very beginnings, human desire is fundamentally “meta-physical.”²⁰ Mimeticism, Girard teaches

¹⁹ “the point I have been trying to make is that, in the end, in the final analysis – or what amounts to the same thing, in the beginning, originally – you cannot separate these two things, the sacred and the ‘manner of comprehending and representing things.’ The sacred is the alpha point of all human ‘manner of comprehending and representing things,’ those things that are *truly* there, and that manifest themselves to human eyes in and beyond their physical reality. They manifest themselves as sacred, or in a sacred way. They, in their physical being there, bear the imprint, appear in the light, of something physically invisible, something beyond themselves. To the best of our knowledge, there is nothing in the human world older than its sacred dimension.” Bandera, *A Refuge of Lies*, 31.

²⁰ Bandera, *A Refuge of Lies*, 13.

us, is ultimately a desire for the very being of the other, the model or rival. “There is clearly something spiritual about human rivalry, something beyond animality.”²¹

If all “comprehension and representation”²² carries with it, or perhaps more accurately, is united with, the sacred, can we begin to assume that the comprehension of the *truth* of death plants the seed for the mimetic desire of a continued life? Does our comrade in life become our rival when faced with the reality of death? Does our survival as a small, familial group, being faced with the truth of death, engender a desire for the life better enjoyed by a now rival group?²³ Again, these are questions perhaps better suited to the theologian; however, it remains that, at this point, the scheme of which Girard begins in earnest – his study of hominization – takes place. Whatever the original impetus is, the “comprehension and representation” of death provides the spark to the explosive combustible, which is mimetic desire turned rivalry. It is *here* where we have the fall. Rivalry turns violent, violence spreads like a contagion, the war of a few becomes a war of all against all, which, in turn, becomes a war of all against one. Magical thinking, the “last resort” in this time of disaster, flings man from out of disinterested revelry directly into what one can describe as the history-of-the-world through the subsequent enculturation that takes place and the institutionalisation of taboos and prohibitions aimed at preventing another catastrophe. It is here in the wake of calamity, not in Spengler’s disinterested light-world gazing, that all “mythology and natural sciences” have arisen, and it is also here, truly, where “ideas of guilt and punishment, of existence as penance, salvation and a life beyond” arise – for what is there to be guilty and penitent for in a world where human guilt does not exist?

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 32.

²³ The famous opening scene of Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey” comes to mind here.

This account of hominization, while highly fanciful, has been necessary to create out of two disparate theories one that, blended together, gives respect to both thinkers and their respective views. However, it is here – once the “problem” of cultural beginnings according to both thinkers is surpassed – where all divergences in thought seem to move toward a very appreciative complementarity, and we enter into a territory where, though separated by time and specialisation, the theories of Spengler and Girard make an impressive union – that is, until they diverge again approaching the difficult conclusions each thinker has in response to the death of culture. Let us see, post-cultural-beginnings, what this looks like.

The sacrifice has been made; the violent energy of a community has been spent on a single victim wherefrom a mystical peace issues. The *pharmakos* has cured the malaise and brought with it a new life for those left to have experienced it and for those who continue to remember it through the myth that proceeds from the sacrifice. In Spenglerian terms, spring has arrived. The early religion and its prohibitions succeeds, in Girard’s estimation, to keep distant or to remove anything threatening the community – including natural disasters – whilst in reality this is, says Girard, merely a rough estimation of, and safeguard to, the “deterioration of human relations at the heart of the community and [...] a shift toward reciprocal violence.”²⁴ Through both a misunderstanding – *meconnaissance* – and the healing salve provided by the *pharmakon*, new avenues open up to the newly born and cohesive cultural unit, whereby the energy which was once aimed at the destruction of the “other” can now be funnelled toward a unit affiliated by blood, soil and, now, a common myth. Here the linkages, in this estimation, between Girard and Spengler become quite obvious.

Rather than envisaging a culture-group somehow spontaneously acting on an un-felt, yet culturally absolute abstract symbol to systematically build its unique cultural institutions,

²⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 13.

Girard provides us with a more historically and anthropologically sober account of how a culture could begin its burgeoning forth into history. Could Spengler's springtime not be the result of a newly avoided violent apocalypse? Could not the newly found peace, the fleeting safety under the net of new prohibitions and taboos, provide the new culture with the impetus to work harmoniously toward historical expansion without fear of one's own neighbour? And, lastly, could not the dissuasion and dissipation of desirous longing and mimetic rivalry through organised ritual provide the "safety valve," as Taylor describes such scenes, from halting the fermenting of the more insidious aspects of this mimetic mechanism? Is this scenario not more plausible than the mere coming together of a felt unity between people who happen to share blood-bonds and geography? For, if ancient myth teaches us anything, as one could imagine Girard arguing, it is precisely these ties which lead to the mimetic rivalry in the first place, as is the case in the innumerable mythical accounts of twins murdering each other, from Romulus and Remus, to Thor and Loki. No, the fact seems that mere blood and soil relations are not enough to provide peace but, seemingly, are precisely that which moves the cogs in the mimetic machine.

Therefore, in this scheme of ours, Girard's historically accurate inclinations will take precedence over Spengler's abstractions, for Girard is correct when he states that "Identity is realised in the hatred of the identical. This is the climactic moment that twins embody, or the enemy brothers of mythology such as Romulus and Remus."²⁵ Blood and soil were not, and are not, enough to provide the cultural cohesiveness required for the kind of culture building of which Spengler speaks. Spengler states that fear is the great motivator, that "it is fear of the invisible that is the essence and hallmark of human religiousness";²⁶ however, as we have seen, it is not a fear for the invisible but precisely its opposite: a fear of the very visible

²⁵ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. (Maryknoll: NY. Orbis Books, 2001), 22.

²⁶ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 5.

violence we can and have inflicted on each other and the misunderstood death we have brought upon a single person or group that truly motivates us to become enculturated and remain one with the crowd. It is not the “out there” that frightens us as much as the “other.”

So here, arriving at our Spenglerian springtime, with the memory of the mythical origins and the religion built around it very fresh in the *spiritus mundi* of the culture, true enculturation can begin and Spengler’s time-line of cultural growth works in tandem with Girard’s assertions. The springtime with its newly awakened, dream-heavy soul and super-personal unity under the auspices of the new god begins its formation of loose cultural forms and experimentation with ornamentation and architecture as it discovers in itself its young world-feeling. Through the creation of new rituals concomitant with the growth of the new culture, this super-personal unity remains undaunted as the deep religious feeling inherent in this cultural period helps disperse any violent feelings desire may shake loose. This is the analogous worlds of the Vedaic religion with its Aryan hero-tales; this is the early Hellenic world of Homer with its Heracletian and Theseun legends and Etruscan discipline. This is the Middle-Eastern time of early Gnosticism, Zoroastrianism and Primitive Christianity held together by the writings of such dynamic writers as Origen, Mani and books such as the early Talmud. And here is also the birth of the European culture with its German Catholicism and Pagan poetry.²⁷

As time moves on, the culture begins to ripen in its consciousness, become formalised and further developed. The variety of springtime form-languages begin to find their completion, and the summer epoch, as described by Spengler, arrives. Here, the relationship with the myth, now a little further removed from memory, also becomes more stylised and the

²⁷ Please note from here on that all examples from these cultural epochs are taken directly from the civilisation models provided in the Appendix of Spengler’s first volume of *The Decline of the West*, 353 ff.

festivals and rituals are elaborated on. The mimetic machine remains, for the most part, shut down as the increasing formalisation helps to continue to disperse the build-up of violent pressure. The *Pharmakon*, whose essence is both to heal and to poison, continues to provide its Balm of Gilead to the culture. Again, in the scheme of Spengler, here we find the oldest element of the Indian Upanishads. We also find, analogously, the Orphic movement and the rise of the Dionysiac followed by the Pythagoreans. Augustine of Hippo further establishes the metaphysics of the new and primitive Christianity as, later on, Byzantium rises – as does the Syriac and Coptic Churches. And, in the ripening Europe, Jan Hus precedes Martin Luther and the beginning of the purely philosophical form of world-feeling begins to take root.

In both the schemes of Spengler and Girard, a period of cultural order and growth gives way to the slow upsetting of that order with, in the case of the former, the emergence of instrumental reason and, in the latter, the breakdown of the sacred which had helped ritualistically keep violence at bay. Both schemes identify that, up until our time at least, the onset of cultural decline is irreversible, with Spengler's hyper-intellectualism replacing all previously dynamic, felt, cultural formations with their anesthetised, rational counterparts and, in Girard's account, the steady disintegration of the structures of the sacred and the inability of ritual to renew the social cohesiveness which it had previously provided. Here, the decline of the culture – which, in Spengler's scheme, coincides with the coming of his autumn – begins in earnest. With the coming of autumn, a shifting of the world-feeling begins to take place. Here we reach the zenith of intellectual creativeness, but with this self-same plateauing of rationality there comes an accompanying withering of the binding power of previously unifying rituals. Slowly but surely, as the *Pharmakon* begins to change from that which heals to that which poisons; the cracks of cultural homogeneity begin to show. Complementary periods of Enlightenment arrive and new “rational religions” take the fore as

the irrational, enchanted aspects of ritual and practise become ever less unifying. For Spengler, this period is the last gasp of any original culture-feeling as the towns and cities become the locus of a new urban consciousness separating the feeling the citizens have so far enjoyed with their original blood and soil bonds. A subterranean unrest begins to stir in the consciousness of the culture-people, and slowly but surely a violent energy begins to ferment. Nevertheless, in this epoch we witness the culmination of cultural potentiality and, according to Spengler, it is here where we witness the greatest feats of a cultural-history. The great conclusive systems of thought take root, which become the ongoing focus for the civilizational, hyper-rational period to come. Here we find Yogic and Vedantic Idealism in ancient India. Analogously, Plato and Aristotle provide the ancient Hellenes with the supposed perfection of their thought. And, in our own Western world, thinkers such as Goethe, Kant, Schelling and Hegel arrive as the culmination of a millennium of thought and provide us with the great and conclusive ethical and philosophical systems to become all-dominating. It is here also that the artistic creations of a culture reach their perfection only to plasticise in the succeeding epoch.

Finally, we arrive at what Spengler has identified as our own fated period: winter. The winter epoch of a living culture turned dead civilisation. The rituals of the past are too irrational for us now to entertain since the great conclusive systems of the preceding epoch have enlightened us with their inscrutable rationality. The ritual whose operation it was to revivify the effect of the original murder has been buried in theory and rational philosophy. The violence that had been controlled through this ritual, however, has not simply vanished. The *Pharmakon*'s salve has become venom. We have discussed at length how Spengler sees this period with regard to earlier epochs. The culture no longer has an inner form. The creative force is extinct and life itself becomes problematic. Ethical practices are reduced to an irreligious and un-metaphysical cosmopolitanism. The body of the people becomes now

an essentially formless mass, and primitive forms of life thrust themselves back up into this highly civilised form of living, including the aforementioned period of state-wide bloodshed followed by the final surrender of our own freedom to a tyrannical Caesar-like figure. A final world-sentiment is achieved and, thus, the culture dies. Could these be the real-historical ramifications of one of the cultures Girard analysed in its death-throes? Could the growing ineffectiveness of the sacrificial mechanism in a culture on the verge of a mimetic breakdown manifest itself in the ways that Spengler describes a dying civilisation?

Before moving on, the purpose of this brief thought experiment is not meant to serve as a sort of inductive proof of Spengler's hypotheses but, rather, to exhibit how certain forms of historical decline comport well with a certain Spenglerian view and, so figured, can help us elaborate further on the specifics of the proposed unity of Girard and Spengler and, as we will come to see, most accounts of historical decline which conform to a certain philosophical understanding of these phenomena. Therefore, with this task completed, let us now elaborate further on the specifics of the proposed unity between Girard and Spengler.

As was seen, there was a distinct coupling of the effects of the *Pharmakon*; that is, in Girardian terms, the murdered victim post-mimetic crisis, and the seasonal structure of Spengler's culture-life cycles have quite an impressive overlay and interplay. In Spengler's account alone, this life cycle is nothing more than the workings of destiny. Through his analogous and contemporaneous analysis, Spengler became convinced that this cycle is eternal and recurring for all cultures past and all cultures to come. In a sense, Girard's account, too, on the surface, seems to suggest the same, mechanical recurrence; however, in his account this rise and fall of cultures is precipitated by, first, the unifying power of the murdered victim turned mythical god remembered through myth and ritual, and, second, by its role as the *Pharmakon* – that which cures and poisons. As we have seen, what Spengler supplies to Girard is a filling in of the historical gaps, so to speak. He provides Girard with a

real historical-political account of what the pharmaceutical effect of a functioning ritual would look like on a culture and its cultural creations when it works to cure, but also of an historical account of what happens when this drug's efficacy begins to wane and how, lacking the curative effect, a culture begins its steady decline into formlessness and a loss of inner-form as new mimetic rivalries and the violence which accompany it begin to draw all those around it into its centre.

What Girard provides Spengler, however, in my view, is far more valuable because, not thinking in pure abstractions, as Spengler does, he supplies a real anthropological motive as to why harmonious cultures spring forth to begin with, and what could truly precipitate their decline into pre-state primitivism. What was not mentioned above, however, was the looming spectre of violence always inherent in Girard's work and curiously missing in Spengler's. It is the supplication to violence by using ritualised violence that truly allows a pre-state people to make the leap into culture and its various manifestations. The death surrogate victim, in each ritualistic re-enactment of the original murder and the preceding chaos of the carnival, supplies the culture with both the release of pressurised, violent energy, but also the on-going unity required by a young culture to continue culture-building. The spectre of violence looms continuously over a culture; however, it is in its youth, when the efficacy of myth, ritual and sacrifice is still at its apex, that violence in and of itself, not of the heroic variant, is of no real concern in terms of its threatening the culture itself. Nonetheless, the violence is never gone and in the early stages of cultural growth violence itself, at least in Spengler's estimation, is a positive force to be harnessed for those cultures great enough to make use of its power.

However, as we have seen, this compromise with violence eventually begins to deteriorate when a culture reaching the height of its lustre slowly begins to lose that on which it has relied for continued providence, namely, the continued production of social unity under the auspices of its cultural myth and the sacrificial rituals which surround it. It is in this

theoretical fusion of both thinkers – and in a scheme which borrows the strength of each thinker’s analyses and uses it to further enhance the other – that this return of destructive violence could be explained in the following way.

The increased focus on rationality – which Spengler attributes to the contemporaneous cultural Enlightenment experienced by all great cultures – weakens the efficacious power of ritual in a cultural epoch characterised by hyper-intellectualisation and the falling away of the importance of the traditional myth. In this sense, Girard’s intuition that the *Pharmakon*’s original unifying cure turned destructive poison seems to have a working symmetry with Spengler’s theory of civilizational rise and decline. When, according to Girard, a pre-state people is thrust into culture via the original murder, this is analogous to Spengler’s emergence of the human-animal into the light-world, which, as we have discussed above, as a theory of hominization does not carry the same veracity as Girard’s anthropological hypothesis. Due, in part, to the newness of the cultural world within which a new post-state people find themselves – along with the fear that accompanies the myriad peculiar phenomena, and the newness of the myth and rituals whose binding power is at its peak – these burgeoning culture-people, free from the destructive, all-encompassing violence they have just expelled through a lesser, more focussed violence, are able to disperse their energies elsewhere, such as into those formative creations detailed by Spengler. In our scheme, Spengler’s springtime is analogous to Girard’s cultural time-line of a people who have recently happened upon the scapegoat mechanism and, in supplying a sacrificial victim, have provided themselves with both the unity and motivation with which to begin creating those necessary structures so valuable to a fresh culture. As per our above fanciful narrative, however, as both naïveté is replaced by reason and the cure of sacrifice becomes corrupted, the draw toward violence through constant mimetic contagions marks the return of all-encompassing violence – in this case, Spengler’s period of contending states. In between

these two events, Spengler's scheme of cultural growth serves to fill in the political-historical gaps in Girard's work, demonstrating in detail what a functional, "in-form" culture looks like under the auspices of a sacrificed deity, and how its growth takes shape over time. There is also some symmetry in both accounts of a decline of culture, although Girard himself does not seem to use such emotive terms.

As we have seen, in Spengler's civilizational stage of decline, the concretisation of older organic traditions and the religions from which they spring are stressed. In applying this to Girard's ideas about the waning power of the surrogate victim's sacrifice to revivify a community experiencing violent escalation through mimetic rivalries, we see another strong link: Spengler's civilizational model of decline and the violence inherent within this period is analogous, in a way, to Girard's model of violence resurfacing during a cultural phase of weakened ritual effectiveness. In both cases, whether in Spengler's political-historical framework or in Girard's cultural-anthropological account, in most pre-Western cultures, this has led to a societal decline in some form or fashion – for the latter, as per his analysis on the *Azteca* peoples, this led to violence and now-hollow ritual sacrifices of such great numbers that the people never recovered, eventuating in a general societal collapse; whereas for the former, as we have seen, this path of decline eventuating into bloodied civil combat is the fate of all cultures with a destiny "large" enough to propel them out of agrarian historylessness.

There is something valuable here in as much as two thinkers, separated not only by time and cultural epoch but also, for the most part, by intellectual discipline, happen to have reflected, in their own way, upon a mechanism of history which, at first, brings a people together out of history in the form of either hominization or enculturation and, eventually, leads its people toward their own decline if not self-destruction. Naturally, both thinkers, being of varied disciplines and philosophical lineage, would reject such an amalgam; however, the point of this exercise has not been to force a theoretic merger but to show how

two different thinkers can chance upon such a mechanism, described through varying disciplinary and epistemological lenses, opening up to us a conversation which would not have been possible if we attempted this from a purely Spenglerian or Girardian point of view. In fact, as we will see, it is their differences that will be of much more interest to us in the following chapter. Of course, both thinkers also differ in the naming and description of this phenomenon, but, as this chapter has set out to show, the theoretical overlap and conditional agreement on such a large amount of key historical moments and movements invites the temptation to draw connections and makes it difficult to relegate to mere coincidence.²⁸ It is also of important note that, while each thinker would, in all likelihood, have rejected the assertions of the other, each also agrees on one of the most important points hitherto largely left alone: that within this apparently mechanistic history – for one, represented by the eternal recurrence of organic cultural birth and decay; for the other, the unconscious “bargain” made with violence by all cultures thus far leading to their exhaustion – the history of the West presents a completely unique case which seems to challenge the historical narrative thus far. Certainly, Girard on this issue seems far more convinced of the absolute uniqueness of this cultural history in comparison to all others that have preceded it when compared to Spengler’s musings on the West. For, in the end, while Spengler, at least in his *Decline*, is

²⁸ It must be noted here that although the use of the word “decline” may be assumed to denote the exact same phenomenon for both thinkers, this is not quite so. What is occurring in this deployment of the concept “decline” is partial denotation, where although there is some overlap of respective theoretical grids, what is being discussed with respect to “crisis” is not different perspectives on an identical phenomenon, but reconstitutions of the same. Naturally, civilisational decline is going to share some common features (such as specific forms of violence, a loss of authority, and the appearance of scapegoats) but, as is argued, what Girard’s theories offer our analysis is an ongoing re-conception or reconstitution of the theories surrounding decline. Although Spengler and Girard both name “crisis” as a focus of their inquiries, in this thesis Girard’s theories force us to engage in what Fleming and O’Carroll call ‘*denotational refinement*’ with respect both to what might constitute “crisis,” what precipitates it, and what resolves it. (Chris Fleming and John O’Carroll, “Revolution, rupture and rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38 (1), (2012). 39-57. Esp. 46)

convinced that the West presents history with a novelty unlike all other preceding cultures – in terms of its grasping for the infinite, its autobiographical self-understanding, its technological superiority and prowess, and the spread of its “soul-feeling” across oceans and continents – he is certain of its demise, like all other cultures, in the face of this all-encompassing historical fate which favours no cultural destiny over any other.²⁹ Girard agrees on this point; that is, that the culture of the West presents history with a singular, never before seen historical episode – one that, for the first time, gives us a choice with regard to overcoming the mechanism which, since the dawning of humanity, cultures have unconsciously relied on, much to their later detriment. For Girard, however, we stand on the precipice of a historical moment of great import, and our choice in the face of this “test,”³⁰ as he describes it, is that which will decide whether or not the decline of Western culture will be absolute. What Girard speaks of here is most certainly a crisis and, whereas both he and Spengler agree that this moment is imminent in the face of historical and anthropological evidence, it is in their respective prescriptions against this decision that an unbridgeable gap between their thinking exists. For all the complementarities which exists between the two, it is their respective response in the face of this impending cultural crises which will allow us the opportunity for a deeper analysis of their respective philosophical strands to see how such a difference of attitude towards such a crisis can be harboured.

²⁹ In his later writing, as we will see, Spengler’s attitude towards the West changes as he begins to see the West’s decline not merely as its natural death in the movement of history only to be replaced by another burgeoning culture (for Spengler, this is Russia); rather, he begins to see the decline of the West not detachedly as he does in his *Decline* but in apocalyptic terms. So much so, where in his *Decline* he offers no decisions to be rendered in order to avoid the decline of Western culture, in his later writing he proposes that a decision must be made with regards to this looming crisis, as is evidenced by the title of a work written after *Decline* entitled *Hour of Decision*.

³⁰ “History, you might say, is a test for mankind. But we know very well that mankind is failing that test” Cynthia Haven, “History is a test. Mankind is failing it,” *Stanford Magazine*, July/August, 2009. <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/history-is-a-test-mankind-is-failing-it>

Chapter 6: The Challenge of Mimetic Theory

But why must it all be acted again? The answer was near at hand; there was still the serpent whispering: For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as Gods. The old father of lies was clever at telling half-truths: How shall you 'know' good and evil, until you have sampled a little? Taste and be as Gods. But neither infinite power nor infinite wisdom could bestow godhood upon men. For that there would have to be infinite love as well.¹

In our previous chapters, after having examined the work of Oswald Spengler and René Girard, I analysed in some detail the historical meanings and uses of the term “crisis.” I did this, firstly, to better understand the term, which, specifically – in today’s political and popular discourse – has often become a rhetorical device used for gathering support for one’s personal or factional preferences. Through its steady transition into commonplace usage – from one whose initial sense derived from medical, juridical and theological debates – it has become a powerful tool to incite mimetic attraction rather than a diagnosis regarding an existential turning point. Secondly, and more importantly, we engaged in this analysis as the writings of both thinkers contain claims about upcoming crises which both Spengler and Girard believed imminent.

In Spengler, claims about crisis are made by virtue of his deterministic view of historically recurrent cycles and their inescapability, whereas in Girard’s, case the idea of crisis is more central and related to ideas of the collapse of differences, apocalypse, and revelation. Most importantly, through understanding that both respective crises were essentially identical –

¹ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 234.

that is, both thinkers saw an imminent period of extreme, escalating, inter-cultural violence which, in the case of the West, would not only destroy itself but had the very real, historically unique, possibility of becoming apocalyptic on a global scale – we also learned that they shared an interesting theoretical overlap. Though this was not an explicit overlap it allowed for a theoretical superimposition through which each thinker was able to fill in the blanks, so to speak, of the other's account of cultural historical beginnings and their general evolution.

As was seen in the previous chapter, Girard's account of mimetic rivalry and hominization through the sacrificial mechanism provided us with a more viable theory of cultural beginnings than Spengler's, which is highly individualistic, Romantic, and abstract, and comes via an almost detached rumination on the wonders of light, life and death on behalf of the new creature called human. Thanks to Girard, we were also able to understand, in Spenglerian fashion, the period of extensive cultural growth that corresponds to Spengler's cultural spring and summertimes, this time not under the auspices of an abstract Prime Symbol working on the collective Will of a Culture, but under the auspices of a newly deified victim whose death brought into being a newly unified community and the creation of the laws with which to govern it. Contrarily, Spengler was useful in showing us how one of Girard's newly born cultures would evolve in political-cultural terms, essentially filling up the historical blanks in Girard's anthropological/cultural-centred scheme. Where Girard shows us the workings and evolution of the mimetic mechanism on a cultural level, Spengler shows us the concomitant cultural creations and structures which arrive and grow from it with its continued, unconscious usage. As was mentioned previously, in the broad evolution of a culture, the two thinkers seemed to enjoy a general theoretical unity. It was also seen that when it came to cultural endings there was a general agreement in how most cultures fared in the face of this mechanistic destiny. Despite these points of mutual understanding, we also learned that, although these two thinkers generally shared an as yet unrecognised intellectual

allegiance, they diverged from each other in two respects, through a larger and more pertinent question that opens up the discussion upon which we will now embark.

The first point of divergence, as mentioned previously, was on cultural beginnings. This we have already discussed in brief. The second point of divergence was their respective response and attitude to the looming crisis they each identified. Essentially, these divergent responses and the conversation they open is what we have so far been working towards. In the previous chapters it was necessary to display the complementarities of both thinkers to show how they could help one another intertextually in bridging theoretical gaps and, importantly, to show what their prescriptions to the crisis reveal about the philosophies that have been foundational to their thought and, in turn, influenced their writings. If both thinkers recognise that there is some mechanism in history which has, since the beginnings of humanity, turned the wheels, so to speak, on cultural growth and eventual decline or exhaustion, and if they facilitate and complement the other in most cultural generalities, why do these two divisive writers differ so much on their response to this mechanism?

This conversation will aim to show an unbridgeable divide between the underlying philosophies that have guided their personal work and the way in which these philosophies have shaped their respective attitudes to the impending crisis they both seem to have identified. It will also show, firstly, that the predominant philosophical framework present in today's intellectual climate is similar to that available to Spengler; and, more than this, that this framework supplied the only reasonable course of analysis that Spengler could take when assessing the rational options available to him, not having recourse to the mimetic theory. Secondly, this chapter will show how, armed with his mimetic theory, Girard provides us with a unique historical critique of the predominant philosophy that has, for lack of a better term, mythologised so much of the intellectual space, making any speculation outside of it ripe for persecution.

To embark on this difficult task, we will be mostly looking at Girard's final, and perhaps most enigmatic, work, *Achever Clausewitz*, or, as it has been titled in English and will be named from here on, *Battling to the End*. We will be doing this for two reasons. Principally, it deals with the two concepts this dissertation has been most concerned with. It is by far Girard's most historically minded piece of writing – one which encompasses, no less importantly, a historical study of the movement from “traditional” forms of war to the modern “total” form based on the writings of Carl von Clausewitz.

For this dissertation, which has identified an impending crisis that presumes a “period of contending states” or a Hobbesian “war of all against all,” as identified by two of the more influential writers of the 20th century, we can begin to see how Girard's study of the changing dynamics of war – from one that is rule-based to one that is total – would be apropos when, in the climate of modern globalisation and run-away military technology, such a war could be, by all accounts, apocalyptic. Secondly, but not without importance, since this was Girard's final work before his death we can perhaps assume that it is the crystallisation and culmination of his thought regarding the anthropological, cultural and psychological application of his mimetic theory. In fact, we could say that in his penultimate book, *Evolution and Conversion*, Girard provides us with his “final” statement regarding mimetic theory and the way it should be utilised and interpreted within these fields. In *Battling to the End*, we see Girard set out into new territory armed with his mimetic theory: one which aims at its application within the philosophy of history. It shows a reinvigorated Girard who, having taken mimetic theory within his original scope to its limits, begins to use his almost half-a-century-long aggregate of knowledge on mimetic theory to begin the writing of a mimetic history that, according to him, “needs to be written.”² In so doing we also see a Girard who challenges some of his younger, more naïve notions with regards to history and

² Girard, *Battling to the End*, 40.

its complexity. Before we do this, however, we must first elaborate on what was meant above when it was stated that we would look at the underlying philosophies that have guided the writing of Spengler and which, consequentially, engendered him towards his pessimistic, determinist stance.

Spengler, German Idealism and the Death of God

“Ignorance is king. Many would not profit by his abdication. Many enrich themselves by means of his dark monarchy. They are his court, and in his name they defraud and govern ...

They will press the battle upon the world when their interests are threatened, and the violence which follows will last until the structure of society as it now exists is levelled to rubble, and a new society emerges. I am sorry. But that is how I see it.” Thon Thaddeo knew the military ambitions of his monarch. He had a choice: to approve them, to disapprove of them, or to regard them as impersonal phenomena beyond his control like a flood, famine or whirlwind.³

It is to Spengler’s credit that, despite the overwhelming popular consensus, he tried to undermine the prevailing Euro-centric history of progressivism. As was stated in our chapter detailing his work, Spengler aimed at overriding the popular notion of history being one long progression to its perfection in what could be termed the German *Golden-Age*, a civilisation at the supposed height of its political, economic and notional powers. His view of history saw the recurring end of all great cultures via the onset of a civilizational *ennui* which would metastasize into a weaponisable dissatisfaction that, in turn, would ultimately end in a period of intercultural bloodshed until the eventual constraining of this energy by a Caesar-like figure to whom the populace, weary of anarchy, would submit their control. His exhortations

³ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 211-212.

toward strengthening blood-ties would do nothing to stop this process but would simply be the “thoroughbred” thing to do.

For Spengler, this purported perfection of history found in Europe would be and was already succumbing to this inevitable decline. We have also discussed how Spengler’s theories have had a strong and almost sudden effect on the modern zeitgeist and how, more and more, his name is being coupled with influencing some of the more radical groups on either side of the extreme ends of the political spectrum.⁴ But are the options on the table for these political groups – that is, the attempt to either halt the decline through reinvigorating ties of “blood and soil” or, in contrast, to accelerate the decline in order to welcome a new quasi-Caesar who will save us from ourselves – the only ones available to us? According to Spengler, yes. In fact, it can be said that thus far, everything that we are witnessing in the political landscape of today had been prophesied by the enigmatic thinker. For example, one could say that he was accurate in his assertions that, in a democratic milieu⁵, the “masses” are unable to make informed decisions on politics due to their being constantly cowed under the “bombardment of intellectual artillery”⁶ by a battling, moneyed few who control the means of media distribution, essentially creating warring factions which precede the coming of the period of civil-wars. Providentially, perhaps, here lies another strong allegiance with the work of Girard, who himself claims that “Violence [in the modern West] now seems deliberate, and the escalation to extremes is served by science and politics.”⁷ This intuition to

⁴ Whether this be a direct influence as is shown in many of the right-wing groups who aim to try and preserve Western culture from its collapse by galvanising ties of “blood and soil,” groups highly influential in the media such as Steve Bannon’s *Breitbart*, or, alternatively, left-wing groups who are aiming to accelerate the decline in order to usher in a new post-Capitalistic age.

⁵ As was seen, Spengler uniformly despised all facets of “democracy” which he saw as the devitalised final stage of a cultures’ political life, the “anarchic intermezzo ... which leads from the destruction of monarchical State supremacy, by way of political, plebeian Rationalism, to the Caesarism of the future” (Spengler, *Hour of Decision*, 22).

⁶ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 2*, 461.

⁷ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 20.

the disaffected – who feel that Democracy has failed to live up to its ideal and, rather, has become a deliberate weapon for the moneyed *intelligentsia* who have monopolised the media for their own nefarious purposes⁸ – seems to these groups an additional endorsement to the prophecies of Spengler. It is no wonder, then, that considering his predictions seemingly becoming realised, the groups on whom he has had such a strong influence would naturally take very seriously his instructions with regards to what actions one could take in the face of his historical inevitability. However, there seems a strange contradiction here: as was discussed in detail in the preceding chapters, in his *Decline of the West*, Spengler is clear that there can be no action with which to counter the current of the cultural-civilizational movement towards its own destruction, apart from an almost utilitarian call to live within the boundaries of the time. One must forego Romantic notions of living as a poet in an age of instrumental reason, dissuade oneself from succumbing to the call of traditional art forms in an age which values mere commodity, be a doer, and not a thinker and in-so-doing not yield to despair in the face of fate but, rather, optimistically and bravely continue to fulfil our duty despite the certainty of our eventual fatality. How is it, then, that these groups whom Spengler has so heavily influenced are not optimistically and heroically striving to live within the times as scientists, engineers or any other “civilisational” occupation, but rather are rallying in great numbers in public, often violent, protests? Where is the supposed heroism of standing one’s duty as did the soldier in Pompeii who continued to stand duty as Vesuvius destroyed all that was around him? If a form of proto-socialism has preceded the end of every great culture – as represented in earlier epochs by Socrates and Buddha – why do the modern students of Spengler, such as the Alt-Right, fight so vehemently against what they see as the

⁸ Whether real or imagined, but the “fake news” phenomenon goes some way to show that whether real or no, this has become a very important issue for many living within Western democracies.

modern take-over of the West by an equally aggressive Left, if this is just par for the course, so to speak?⁹

To understand this, we must look toward Spengler's later writings, in particular, his last authored book, *Hour of Decision*. While his *Decline* was a detached philosophical enquiry into, and assertion of, the movement of history, *Hour of Decision*, released in 1933, a decade after *Decline*, makes no such claims. This work explicitly calls for action from the Germanic peoples to contend against the fate he has spelled out for them. A contemporary review of this book by Allen Tate in *The American Review* journal in 1934 succinctly questions this change of attitude in Spengler:

The question that [...] Spengler's historical doctrine raise, in connection with *The Hour of Decision*, is chiefly this: How can Spengler's organic determinism be reconciled with the call to arms that he now shouts to the white races, particularly the Teutonic peoples, to repel the twin revolutionary menace of the dark races and of the proletariat? I think this part of the new Spengler book may be dismissed as so much jingoism. In the violent attack on communism and other phases of the international revolutionary movement, Spengler forgets the schematicism of *The Decline of the West*, and falls into a kind of "rugged individualism" when he praises here and there the responsible man who by zeal and foresight builds a factory or a fortune.¹⁰

As we know, Spengler decried democracy as the playing field for those with money and the resources to wield incredible public influence. Additionally, the changing attitudes to land ownership and one's connection to their soil was also a thorn in his side. While it is no secret that Spengler abhorred socialism in all of its forms, in *The Hour of Decision* Spengler also

⁹ As of this writing, former President Donald Trump had threatened to designate "Antifa," a famously violent group of Left-wing counter-protestors, as an organisation of terror.

¹⁰ Allen Tate, "Spengler's Tract Against Liberalism" *American Review*, 3, (1934): 44.

targets capitalism, stating that, in essence, socialism and capitalism are both aimed at the destruction of private property and a complete disconnect of the citizenry to their native soil.

In the words of Tate,

The institution of property has disappeared, as it always disappears, says Spengler, when Culture passes into Civilisation. These special terms need not concern us: what does concern us is this – that Capitalism and Socialism are simply different names for an attack on the institution of property that has now been going on since the latter part of the seventeenth century. International finance-capitalism has attacked the ownership of land and has reduced even factory production to slavery; it is the attack from above. Socialism would carry this process further, it would destroy the last trace of private property and schematise the whole function of man in the abstract money-system invented by finance capital: this is the attack from below.¹¹

While this was written in his later works, what Spengler announces here is, in fact, nothing new when viewing his work as a whole: as early as 1919, in between the releases of the first and second volume of *The Decline of the West*, when he still considered himself a socialist, Spengler released an influential essay¹², *Prussianism and Socialism*, which took aim at both English socialism, which focused predominantly on the distinction between rich and poor, and the capitalist nature of the English people, whose manifestation in democracy has merely provided the possibility for everyone to become rich. For Spengler, the Prussian form of socialism, or what he called “the socialism of blood,” which he championed, focused on the distinction between command and obedience and, rather than providing the mere possibility

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² Carl Dreher, “Spengler and the Third Reich,” *VQR*, Spring, 1939.
<https://www.vqronline.org/essay/spengler-and-third-reich>

to attain riches, provided the individual with the possibility of attaining every existing rank.¹³ According to some writing on the year of Spengler's death in 1939, it was this (among other early Spengler texts) which held him in good graces with the future Third Reich,¹⁴ until, according Dreher, Spengler "declined to join in the 'Heil Hitler!' chorus."¹⁵ It was, however, in his final days that Spengler disavowed not only capitalism but also his avowed nationalistic socialism in favour of violent revolution.

It must be repeated here again that what Spengler is writing at this time is nothing necessarily new or revolutionary when taking into consideration the intellectual milieu within which he wrote. What Spengler felt during the writing of *Hour of Decision* was a pessimism towards both political/economic systems available in modern post-feudal, industrial Europe; he recognised, as per the quote above, that both systems, beyond their ideals, degenerated into a destruction of privation and the acceleration into a new form of slavery. Whether or not Spengler is right in his political concerns, what is telling is his drastic shift into pessimism and his change in attitude in the face of his own conclusions regarding historical fate. These may have, by extension, coloured his attitudes towards other components within the social-historical framework, such as politics and economy. What this indicates in the view of this thesis is a deeper problem beyond economic or political criticism. While Spengler's milieu saw itself wrestling with these two opposing political and economic systems, as will be shown, Spengler himself was caught between two opposing yet equally influential and unavoidable philosophies. It was these philosophies that, from a macro point of view, came to shape the entire intellectual landscape within which he found himself and which, until today,

¹³ It must also be said here as an aside, that Spengler's initial, fervent support of a nationalistic form of Socialism is coincidental with his own particular interest at this time at moving toward a career in politics. As these dreams were dashed, however, Spengler more and more disowned socialism and, by extension, politics.

¹⁴ Dreher, "Spengler and the Third Reich."

¹⁵ Ibid.

have continued to dominate and, in a sense, “shut out” any possibility of an unfolding of history that is contrary to Spengler’s vision.

For what fed Spengler’s overall pessimism, as noted above, was his historical determinism turned fatalism. As will be shown by Girard’s conclusion, it was not merely the neutral observation of history and its recurring patterns that caused Spengler’s stoic-heroism-turned-violent-action to ferment in his writing. In his book *From Dawn to Decadence*, Jacques Barzun recognises that, in writing any narrative about history, the reader prefers a work which is “selective and critical rather than neutral and encyclopaedic,”¹⁶ and though as an historian his aim is to “give visions of the past,” in the case of philosophers of history, they “do not give us transcripts but visions of the world.” In the case of Spengler, who “pointing out [...] thematic unity and continuity [...] saw history as moved by a single force toward a single goal,”¹⁷ he proposes his own philosophy of history, his own vision. This lack of neutrality that Barzun identifies in all historiography, but especially in philosophies of history, indicates that behind Spengler’s seemingly indifferent historical and cultural pattern recognition, there indeed lies a background influence that guides his organising and sense-making of history and culture.

Despite his best attempts at separating himself from all previous historical analysts with his Goethian-inspired morphology of history, his organic and seasonal analogies, his culture/civilisation divide and, in his later writing, his conflation of political and economic systems, his essential ideas show a real impossibility in providing a solution to the impending crisis which has not, in some form or another, been advanced by previous thinkers. This is not for lack of trying on his part, nor the result of poor scholarship and academic prowess (although these criticisms have been heavily laid on him), but points to a far deeper issue in

¹⁶ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001), xiii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

the humanities, philosophy notwithstanding, which, for the last century, seems to have disallowed any conclusion apart from the ones he settled on.

This issue (one which Girard himself had admittedly contested throughout his career) is constituted by the two all-pervading and influencing philosophical pillars that have come to dominate the philosophy of history and perhaps, by extension, all of contemporary philosophy: historical fatalism and utopian determinism. Spengler fluctuated between both in his career. While there have been too many thinkers to credit with regards to the formation of these twin pillars of thought, and though many variations have emerged from their deep philosophical origins, for ease of digestion it could be said that the archetypes of these varying thoughts are Nietzsche and Goethe via Hegel (and vice versa). Of course, in naming these thinkers it must readily be said that much of *their* thought has been borrowed, commandeered, altered and adapted by many thinkers since their writing, sometimes to the detriment of the original idea espoused by both parties. Additionally, there is obviously, prior to both thinkers, a theoretical ancestry that precedes the work of both Nietzsche and Hegel, which can be said to have deeply influenced their own thought. Naming them as both the originators and only champions of this thought does not do justice to the myriad thinkers both before and after them. Nonetheless, it is these two thinkers whose thought best articulated their respective philosophies and, it could be argued, had the most lasting influence. Additionally, other fatalists and utopians name these two thinkers as intellectual instructors and rivals. However, while these names will be signposts for their respective line of thought, it must be noted here that it is the idea, more than the thinker, that shaped these twin pillars which, since their erection, have cast their influence over most, if not all, contemporary philosophy. In this vein, to quote Barzun, “the fruits [...] have not sprouted out of the ground like weeds; they are the work of innumerable hands and heads. I have cited famous names,

but they had predecessors now forgotten, and then followers who harped on one idea until it was made actual at last by the consent of the multitude.”¹⁸

But what do these two terms connote and what do they mean in the bigger picture of this thesis? As we will see, there is ample evidence throughout Spengler’s career of his being influenced by both of these philosophical pillars. In some places he favours one over the other to suit his purposes and, in some writings, especially in his *Decline of the West*, he explicitly attempts to make use of both in order to paint his broad historical picture. As to whom he credits for his intellectual inspiration Spengler claims: “The philosophy of this book I owe to the philosophy of Goethe, which is practically unknown to-day, and also (but in a far less degree) to that of Nietzsche.”¹⁹ He continues by quoting a letter of Goethe’s to Eckermann:

The Godhead is effective in the living and not in the dead, in the becoming and the changing, not in the become and the set-fast; and therefore, similarly, the reason (*Vernunft*) is concerned only to strive towards the divine through the becoming and the living, and the understanding (*verstand*) only to make use of the become and the set-fast.²⁰

Of this statement, Spengler declares, “This sentence comprises my entire philosophy.”²¹ The link between Goethe and Hegel here might seem a little tenuous; however, Rudolf Steiner in a series of lectures remarks how Goethe’s and Hegel’s conception of the world is identical, if only expressed in opposite ways. In his lecture series “Goethe’s conception of the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 1*, 320.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

World,” Steiner concentrates on this allegiance in a particular lecture reserved for this conversation entitled “Goethe and Hegel.” In it he states that Goethe

observes the phenomena of light and colour and penetrates to the basic phenomenon; he tries to find his bearings amid the multiplicity of plant life and arrives at his sensible-supersensible archetypal plant. He does not rise from the basic phenomena or the archetypal plant to higher explanatory principles. This he leaves to the philosophers.²²

Goethe’s foundation was that *the* idea is eternal and unique, and all other ideas are only the manifestation of *the* idea. The multiplicity of ideas can and must be traced back to the one fundamental form just as “it is possible to trace the plant back to the leaf”;²³ therefore it is “just as much in accordance with the Goethean world-conception to speak of a metamorphosis of ideas as of a metamorphosis of plants. Hegel is the philosopher who has tried to portray this metamorphosis of ideas. He is therefore the philosopher of the Goethean world-conception.”²⁴ In fact, in a series of letters between Hegel and Goethe, one can see that Hegel feels himself to be “the philosopher of the Goethean world-conception”²⁵ and “attributes to Goethe the far more significant paternity of founding the whole cultural movement in which Hegel himself stands.”²⁶ In his letter to Goethe dated February 20, 1821, Hegel writes,

The simple and abstract, which you very strikingly call the basic phenomenon, you place at the summit; then you show the concrete phenomena as arising out of the

²² “Goethe and Hegel”. *Rudolf Steiner Archive*. Accessed August 15, 2020. https://wn.rsarchive.org/Books/GA006/English/APC1928/GA006_c11.html

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*. trans. Clark Butler and Christine Seiler. (Bloomington, MN: Indiana University Press. 1985), 691.

addition of further modes of influence and circumstances, and regulate the whole process in such a way that the order proceeds from the simple to the more complex conditions; and, thus ordered, the complex now appears in all its clearness as a result of this analysis. To discover the basic phenomenon, to free it from the surroundings accidental to it, to conceive it abstractly as we say — this I consider to be a matter pertaining to the great, spiritual perception of Nature, besides being the path in general towards the truly scientific side of knowledge in this field.[...] may I, however, also say to you that the special interest which a basic phenomenon brought to life in such a way has for us philosophers, is that we are able to turn it to the use of philosophy. We have, of course, in the first place our oyster-like, grey, or quite black Absolute, nevertheless we have directed it towards the air and the light, so that it has become covetous of these, but we need window-spaces in order finally to bring it out to the full light of day; our schemes would disappear in smoke if we were to transplant them into the motley, intricate society of the perverse world. At this point, your basic phenomena serve us excellently; in this twilight, spiritual and intelligible by virtue of its simplicity, visible and tangible by virtue of its sensibility, the two worlds, our abstruse one and phenomenal existence, greet each other[.]²⁷

Less time can be spent discussing the influence of Goethe on Nietzsche who, in various passages throughout his oeuvre, expounds Goethe as a true free spirit who undoubtedly had an effect on his writings. The most flattering of these panegyrics can be found in his *Twilight of the Idols*:

Goethe — not a German event, but a European one: a magnificent attempt to overcome the eighteenth century by a return to nature, by an ascent to the naturalness

²⁷ “Goethe and Hegel”.

of the Renaissance — a kind of self-overcoming on the part of that century ... What he wanted was totality; he fought the mutual extraneousness of reason, senses, feeling, and will (preached with the most abhorrent scholasticism by Kant, the antipode of Goethe); he disciplined himself to wholeness, he created himself ... Such a spirit who has become free stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and *trusting fatalism* [my italics], in the faith that only the particular is loathesome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole — he does not negate anymore. Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name of Dionysus.²⁸

We must take the level of Goethe's influence on both thinkers as merely anecdotal, although by all accounts it was quite pervasive. The purpose of entertaining this idea is to show how the two main spheres of philosophical influence – namely, historical fatalism and utopian determinism – that Spengler oscillated between as he matured as a thinker rested on a solid foundation which, since the double-movement of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, had remained, for the most part, steadfast in its academic sovereignty.

How do these respective philosophies deal with the historical crisis that, for Spengler, has thus far destroyed every culture that has lived long enough to reach the stage of civilisation?

We must now look at the argument from the point of view of Girard, who opens us up to a new possibility outside of these pillars.

In the first case, that of historical fatalism, we see Spengler exhibit Nietzsche's *amor fati*. As quoted previously in this thesis, we see Spengler prescribe our being “thoroughbred” in this historically pre-allotted time of civilizational decline; to “Not merely bear what is

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 222.

necessary, still less conceal it ... but *love* it.”²⁹ Nevertheless, in this scenario, the crisis is fated to mature into violent catastrophe, and it is merely our lot to bear it, and to bear it bravely. For Spengler, his work is a work of pure optimism where even in the face of impending catastrophe we can, nonetheless, affirm ourselves through overcoming the limits that fate has set for us with regards to our possibilities of flourishing. However, not all that glitters is gold when one attempts to live this philosophy in the face of an all-encompassing, destructive crisis. Spengler’s later life seems to mirror that of Nietzsche’s who, rather than bravely doing what is commanded to him by fate and overcoming himself through this process, seems to want to meet the impending violence of his age with his own. Spengler, likewise, instead of bravely adhering to the injunctions of a pre-determined fate, advises, in his last works, to violently expel or, at the very least, repel the weak, foreign elements of the culture he had already assigned for death since it was they, he believed, that would accelerate its demise.

Why, in the writings of both of these thinkers, do we see a change from the stoic acceptance of fate to the call for the need of some sort of persecutory sacrifice (in this case, those perceived to be weakening society?) If this is all part of the destiny pre-assigned for a culture, why the shift from “thoroughbred” compliance to violent persecution?

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 258.

Girard and Nietzsche

*For man was a culture-bearer as well as a soul-bearer, but his cultures were not immortal and they could die with a race or an age, and then human reflections of meaning and human portrayals of truth receded, and truth and meaning resided, unseen, only in the objective logos of Nature and the ineffable Logos of God. Truth could be crucified; but soon, perhaps, a resurrection.*³⁰

It is in trying to understand the phenomenon inherent in most, if not all, fatalist philosophies where Girard's works become invaluable. From the perspective of Girard, the error lies not so much in the philosophy of Nietzsche, whose fatalistic historiography has had a profound effect on the humanities, but with those champions of Nietzsche's thought who seem to treat with a mysterious silence a concept of Nietzsche's that, in Girard's estimation, drove the philosopher to insanity.³¹ Since Spengler himself falls within this category of post-Nietzschean proponents, it also goes a fair way in explaining why, in his own writings, Spengler falls prey to this exceeding pessimism in the face of crisis.

In the September 1984 issue of the journal *MLN*, Girard contributed an essay titled "Dionysius versus The Crucified," which aimed a direct criticism at the subsequent advocates of Nietzschean thought who, he believed, committed the abovementioned error. Dionysius versus the crucified; this is the moniker signed by Nietzsche in his final years of lucidity and, for Girard, this offers us strong evidence that the very dispute between the Crucified Christ of the Christian Gospels and all the other gods, here represented by the figure of Dionysius, was the question-turned-monomania which drove Nietzsche beyond the brink of sanity. For it was to the credit of Nietzsche's great genius, according to Girard, that he, unlike those who came

³⁰ Miller, *A Cantic for Leibowitz*, 144.

³¹ René Girard, "Dionysus versus the Crucified" *MLN*, Vol. 99, No.4, French Issue (September, 1984): 818

after him, recognised in this contrast *the* great metaphysical and philosophical problem to be deciphered. Girard too recognised this necessity. However, the academics to come after Nietzsche seemed to relegate Nietzsche's great religious problematic in favour of the appearance of what Girard calls the "avatars" of Nietzsche – the latter who pushed this problem further into the background and eventually into an intellectual no-go zone. "Nietzsche the genealogist, Nietzsche the advocate of 'free play,' Nietzsche the exponent of counter-culture,"³² all of these avatars and the intellectual effort made to support them increasingly overshadowed Nietzsche "the last Atheist," as described by Fleming and O'Carroll.³³ This "marketplace of wrong-turns"³⁴ – that is, this error of encapsulation with regards to positing one of these Nietzschean personae as *the* Nietzsche – has, in a sense, undervalued the multitudinous aspect of Nietzsche's thought. However, despite the importance of this profusion of Nietzsche's thought, there must be a ballast, so to speak, that provides integrity to the whole. One cannot deny the multiplicity of readings and the diversity of interpretation despite this agglomeration; it stands to reason that one of these interpretations or readings "approximates what geologists call the 'mantle'—those hot, viscous layers which determine much of what happens on the sometimes volatile surface of the earth. It is the layer of Nietzsche's work that is simultaneously essential to the task of self-understanding in our age, and the one to which his philosophical apogees exhibit their most serious allergies."³⁵ For according to Girard there has indeed been an "allergy" or "silence" toward that branch of Nietzschean thought, the anthropologico-moral,³⁶ which has

³² Ibid., 816.

³³ Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll, "Nietzsche: The Last Atheist" in *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred, Volume 1: Girard's Mimetic Theory across the Disciplines* ed. Chris Fleming, Joel Hodge, and Scott Cowdell. (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Corporation. 2012), 227

³⁴ Ibid., 228.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 229.

had a lasting effect on the reception and interpretation of Nietzsche's thought. This entailed a marginalisation of this particular program of Nietzsche's – and what Girard calls a “forced inversion to inverted platonism”³⁷ – so that, even up until today, the Nietzsche being studied “bears scant relation to the one whose last words in his last published work were a signature: “Dionysus versus the Crucified.”³⁸ Let us explore this further in terms of what this marginalisation means, who is responsible, what their motivations were/are and what it means for our discussion with regards to Spengler and his historiography; for, as we will see, this surface interpretation, if it can be so called, has had a lasting effect on the way we have tried to penetrate the meaning of history and, therefore, its current course.

But what is the thought of *this* Nietzsche that Girard and, by extension, Girardian scholars such as Fleming and others, believe is the “mantle” of Nietzsche's general oeuvre? As hinted at above, it all has to do with these “last words” of Nietzsche's: Dionysius versus the Crucified.

In Nietzsche's own words,

Dionysius versus the “Crucified”: there you have the antithesis. It is *not* a difference in regards to their martyrdom – it is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and *recurrence* [my italics], creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering – the “Crucified as the innocent one” – counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation. – One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of

³⁷ Girard, “Dionysius versus The Crucified,” 817

³⁸ Fleming and O'Carroll, “Nietzsche: The last Atheist,” 228.

suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering ... Dionysius cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.³⁹

For Nietzsche there is an analogy between the murder and death of Dionysius and that of Christ, the Crucified, and, since these are antithetical, a great difference also. However, as Nietzsche points out, the difference is *not* in regards to their martyrdom. What, then, is this difference and what does this insight tell us? Unfortunately, it is here where Girard claims the issues with regards to Nietzsche's interpretation begin to arise. Girard acknowledges that this difference was conceded in earlier writings, particularly Freud's *Totem and Taboo*; however, as time passed the only difference discerned was that which Nietzsche warned us about: those regarding their martyrdom. Of understanding the importance of this difference Girard says,

It has disappeared from modern anthropology, lost and buried beneath the fast accumulating rubble of scholarly fashion [...] When the anthropologists first observed the great abundance of gods collectively murdered in religious cults everywhere, they felt they had discovered something important and so did Nietzsche, obviously ... This remarkable similarity is one important reason why the later Nietzsche can resort to a single symbol, Dionysius, for countless mythological cults ... If the facts are the same in all these cults, it can be safely assumed, or so they thought, that these religions must be the same. And this element of sameness is obviously present in the Judaic religion with its ritual sacrifices, and even more spectacularly in the Christian religion. The passion of Jesus certainly constitutes the hearth of the gospels, and what

³⁹ Girard, "Dionysius versus The Crucified," 820.

is it if not one more instance of these collective murders that are the daily bread of religions over the world?⁴⁰

In terms of an historical outlook, we can already begin to guess how this anthropological conflation with the Christian religion and all other religious myths could serve to present a hindrance to a proper understanding of the functioning of myth within cultures. Spengler, a devout Nietzschean, also falls prey to this conflation of myths through his assertion that it is a culture's Ur-Symbol, the Prime-idea inwardly actualised and externally substantiated through a people's blood and soil, and not religion and its concurrent myth, which serves to lay the foundation for the structures of a working, harmonious culture. Simply put, for Spengler, religious concepts arise *out of* the fundamental principle of the particular culture. However, in asserting this he makes the error of which Nietzsche, consciously or unconsciously, was trying to dispel. In treating the myth of the West – which for Spengler begins with the German Catholicism of 1000 AD and is therefore inherently Christian – as just another Cultural myth created *out of* a Prime Symbol, rather than the reverse, he, like the anthropologists Girard criticises, fails to understand the fundamental differences between Dionysius and the Crucified and, by extension, what this has meant for the culture of the West, which is now in its “fated” decline. In Girard's anthropological account, though, this is a grave mistake and one which, surprisingly, has been championed and further mystified by Nietzsche's most ardent prophets.

Of these Nietzschean apostles, none is more oft quoted on this as Martin Heidegger, who, according to Girard, “gives an impression of radical indifference to religion, an attitude that has become a model for quite a few people.”⁴¹ The reason, it seems, is that “to Heidegger, ‘Dionysus versus the Crucified’ was merely the Nietzschean reversal of a previous Christian

⁴⁰ Ibid., 820-821.

⁴¹ Ibid., 817.

formula: ‘The Crucified versus Dionysus, and therefore the same empty struggle for power between two rival religions.’⁴² In Heidegger’s assertion, therefore, “the essential history of our world is post-philosophical and religion is irrelevant,”⁴³ meaning any recourse to religion or even a religious anthropology is alien, particularly to “the real issue of our times [...] ‘the withdrawal of being’ and its comet tail of post-philosophical discourse.”⁴⁴ We will continue this line of thought; however, while Heidegger is often quoted by Girard and his champions, scant attention is paid to Spengler and the influence he had had on Heidegger. In fact, it can be said that the Nietzschean world-historical view articulated by Spengler was one which heavily influenced and informed Heidegger with regards to his own concerns of the declining culture of the West. In Heidegger’s own words,

That people today tend once again to be more in agreement with Spengler’s propositions about the decline of the West, lies in the fact that (along with various superficial reasons) Spengler’s proposition is only the negative, *though correct, consequence of Nietzsche’s word*, “The wasteland grows.” We emphasize that this word is thoughtful. It is a true word.⁴⁵

Although Heidegger was also highly critical of Spengler on some points, particularly Spengler’s insistence that the decline of the West was due to biological or racial reasons rather than spiritual and metaphysical ones, the “early Heidegger began to conceive of his own work as an attempt to provide a philosophically sound account for the *symptoms* of decline popularised by Spengler.”⁴⁶ In spite of Heidegger calling Spengler’s “philosophy of

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 817-818.

⁴⁵ Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art*. (Bloomington, MN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 26 [my italics].

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

history without the historical”⁴⁷ a *lucus a non lucendo*, “Heidegger sought to provide the authentic philosophy of history missing in Spengler.”⁴⁸ Therefore, in simple terms, from Spengler through to Heidegger and beyond, one can see the devolvement of this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought, as religion, although interchangeable, goes from something in Spengler that is a cultural necessity corresponding to the “vitality” of a people to something that is “irrelevant” in the grander scheme of Heidegger’s post-philosophic *Weltanschauung*. In what might very well be considered by Girardians to be the height of irony, Heidegger’s main critique of Spengler is that his biologicistic conception of history is “the result of a superficial interpretation of Nietzsche’s doctrines.”⁴⁹ However, as Girard has pointed out, it is the superficial interpretation – and, worse, the wilful ignorance of – Nietzsche’s distinction between Dionysus and the Crucified and the anthropologico-moral consequences that has been of most detriment to modern scholarship around Nietzsche. But what light can Girard shine on this error and how, if taken into consideration, would this affect Spengler’s historical account and his response to cultural crises?

In his *Decline*, Spengler recognises that the culture of the West, the “Faustian Soul” begins with the German Catholicism congruent to roughly 1000 AD. For Spengler, this “version” of Catholicism is a consequence of the pseudomorphic⁵⁰ retention of the Roman civilisation the new people happened to inherit (in the same way that, say, the future Russian religion will be a pseudomorphic retention of the Western civilisation that has spread toward the East). That is, a new “soul people” – the Germans of 1000 AD with their newly found Catholicism – “filled in” the husk of the freshly evacuated Roman civilisation and its existing structures with a new soul-feeling while, simultaneously, syncretising to the civilisation they

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See the chapter in this thesis dedicated to Spengler for a brief discussion of this term.

had now replaced, effectively separating *this* form of Catholicism to its Arabian, or *Magian*, counterpart. There is nothing new in this for Spengler, who asserts that all “new” cultures and their respective religions are but a result of this process of civilizational pseudomorphosis. Furthermore, that there has been a great reformation to this religion, and a strict “rationalising” of it towards a more humanocentric version (as was the case with the Reformation of the sixteenth century), is also nothing new when compared with the facts of history. For Spengler, the change from Western Catholicism and its mystical-metaphysical view of the world toward its more purely philosophical counterpart in the Protestantism of the Reformation and beyond is just as natural to the life-cycle of a culture as the change from the Demeter religion of the ancient peoples of the Hellenic world (around the years 1100-800 BC) to the “reformed” Orphic movement of the 7th Century BC⁵¹ and its eventual concretisation in the Stoicism of 200AD Rome: the degradation of abstract thinking into a final, and fatal, world sentiment. Likewise, the same can be said of the Vedic religion of the India of 1500-1200 BC and its reformed Brahmanic counterpart of the 10th and 9th centuries BC and its final sentiment in the Indian Buddhism of today. Therefore, in the reckoning of Spengler, the religion of the West, along with its culture, to which it provides spirit and inspiration, is merely following the natural path of its birth and decay as per the theme of historical recurrence that Spengler believed he had observed in his historical studies. In this view, Christianity, like every other religion preceding it and to come, no longer has the ability to revivify this dying civilisation as it, too, has finally “degraded” to the ethical socialism of today.⁵² Following this position, it is no wonder then that, for Spengler, the “crisis” of the end of Western civilisation described in *Decline* was something natural and pre-ordained by Destiny. In this scheme, a stoic bravery, a relinquishing of control over to fate, is the only

⁵¹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West Vol. 1*, 353.

⁵² Ibid.

thorough action to be taken. Furthermore, it is indeed very possible that this insight informed the young Heidegger as to the uselessness of religion to considering the future of our technological, post-philosophical world.

For Girard, however, this habit of contemporising and comparing the “life-cycle” or function of Christianity with all other religions, so common to the anthropologists and sociologists of Spengler’s and Heidegger’s time (and today) is an egregious error that undermines the problem which the late Nietzsche tried to penetrate with a monomaniac zeal. Additionally, the very nature of this difference between “Dionysus and the Crucified” *disallows* a possible future beyond the crisis faced by the West. In Girard’s estimation, this approaching crisis of Western culture, with Christianity as its background, comprises the globe and has the potential to be truly apocalyptic. Girard believed that Nietzsche also knew this, as “Nietzsche tried to put his critique of Christianity on a basis less shaky than the one that was already standardised in his time, the great positivistic equivalence of all religious traditions. He knew too much about pagan mythology not to be revolted by the shallow assimilation of the Judeo-Christian with the pagan.”⁵³ Since the coming crisis described by Spengler includes a period of extreme violence, and Girard’s accounts of cultural beginnings and endings also include extreme violence at their heart, due to the mimetic mechanism, it has become clear that violence, and its “function,” is *the* key component in these culture-defining moments. And, for Girard, it is precisely the distinction of how violence functions, and a culture’s attitude towards it, that separates all “pagan” religions – Dionysus – from the revelation in the Christian Gospels via the Crucified. With regards to Nietzsche’s view on pagan religion and morality, Girard writes:

⁵³ Girard, “Dionysus versus the Crucified”, 818.

He maintained that the Christian spirit tries to stifle “life” by repressing the most dynamic individuals of a culture. This is the famous “morality of the slaves” versus “the morality of the masters,” the one thing everybody knows about the Nietzschean distinction between paganism and Judeo-Christianity. A culture has to pay a price in order to breed a class of higher men. It has to assume even the worst forms of violence. Time and time again, Nietzsche tells us that Dionysus accommodates all human passions, including the lust to annihilate, the most ferocious appetite for destruction. Dionysus says yes to the sacrifice of many human lives, including, not so paradoxically, those of the highest type that is being bred in the process.⁵⁴

Nietzsche, who did not necessarily relish Dionysian violence, nonetheless understood that “this violence plays an essential role and it should not be suppressed.”⁵⁵ And neither, may it be said, did Spengler believe this violence should be suppressed. For Spengler, though this violence at the height of the crisis is, essentially, the death knell for a civilisation, as per Nietzsche its purpose is to “breed” the most “dynamic individuals” – which, in a Spenglerian context, is the coming of a Caesar-like figure once the people in the throes of violence have spent their violent energies. Or, if it could be said, once civility, politics and rationality have been “sacrificed” in favour of pure, unbridled vengeance, it must be “resurrected” in the form of a singular figure who takes these concepts upon themselves as their living avatar. As seen above, Spengler does not seem to want to renounce this violence; rather, he aims, in his later career, to control the violence so that the Caesar-like figure that arises is of his own “blood and soil” rather than from one of the “brown hordes” he seems to despise so greatly.

This is one of two main reasons, the other to be discussed shortly, that the young Spengler who subscribes to this misunderstood portion of Nietzsche’s belief maintains his

⁵⁴ Ibid., 819.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

“thoroughbred” optimism in the faces of this crisis. The death of the West, of its “type” of Christianity, is merely the launching point for a new quasi-syncretic culture in his scheme of endlessly recurrent cycles within history. But what Spengler fails to understand is that Christianity, in and of itself, through the revelations of the Gospels, has changed the meaning of this violence, which, in pagan societies, has allowed for its own overcoming through the celebration of the societies whose foundation was vengeful violence. The Gospels, however, have dispelled this, according to Girard, who recognises in the “myth” of Christianity a new point of view hitherto never arrived at by any other religious myth: that of the victims. The Spenglerian system – in which dead civilisations give way to a new culture-peoples who, through pseudomorphosis, syncretise and revive the former host culture’s religion in a new guise – would still require the necessary *meconnaissance* of the entire scapegoating mechanism for the sacrifice to function as a culture-forming phenomena. This cannot be the case with a religion, Christianity, that has “stripped away the mantle of the sacred – the veil of sacrificial mystification – and forced us to see the victim’s face and hear the victim’s voice.”⁵⁶ If, as we have hypothesised in the previous chapter, the originating murder operates as Spengler’s thrusting of a culture into history, and an originating murder could not be misrecognised in a post-Christian world, the original murder which would have, in previous eras, brought *catharsis* could do so no longer. In this scheme, “cultural violence that does not climax in *catharsis* will result in *mimesis*,”⁵⁷ meaning that the original outbreak of mimetic violence would only result in more mimetic violence, disallowing the necessary conditions for the birth of new cultures from out of the mimetic vortex. This insight poses some serious questions with regards to the viability of eternal recurrence as a working scheme for a philosophy of history. Again, in the original system of Spengler’s, this cycle of cultural birth

⁵⁶ Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 109.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

and death was the mechanism of history that would recur for as long as the earth could play host to life-forms;⁵⁸ however, according to mimetic theory, the events of the Gospel “represents the entry into the world of a new mode of historicity,”⁵⁹ which announces the progression of humanity towards a definite end of times. In a sense, Spengler, in following Nietzsche, is trying to recover a pre-Christian conception of history that rejects any notion of progress and champions earlier epochs against later ones. As Karl Lowith points out,

To classical antiquity the course of history appeared not at all as a “course” but as a cyclic succession of identical phases, never experiencing a new transformation directed towards a definite goal in the future. Thus every idea of progress was inaccessible to the philosophers of antiquity. Even the most sagacious of them rather shared the popular belief that the contemporary state of things was far inferior to that of former times.⁶⁰

This scheme suits Spengler’s personal Romanticism, which allows him to glorify earlier “springtime” eras of a culture and to degrade the current age without so much as having to offer any prescription. This attitude of Spengler’s becomes inconsistent as his supposed objective observations become, in his later career, a call to arms – evidence, perhaps, of a distrust of his own convictions with regard to his scheme – one which would eventuate to a later move toward Hegelianism, the same Hegelianism he tried his best to deny in his *The Decline of the West*.

⁵⁸ Spengler showed a great concern for the ability of the Earth to continue to host life in the face of environmental disasters. This was again linked to the spread of the Western soul-feeling whose striving for the infinite would necessarily see the resources of the planet exhausted in this quest. In fact, apart from the coming intercultural bloodshed, Spengler’s main concern centered on the exhaustion of Earth’s resources, leading to environmental calamities.

⁵⁹ Bailie, *God’s Gamble*, 123.

⁶⁰ Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History: Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 73.

Spengler's Hegelian Turn

*To minimise suffering and to maximise security were natural and proper ends of society and Caesar. But then they became the only ends, somehow, and the only basis of law – a perversion. Inevitably then, in seeking only them, we found only their opposites: maximum suffering and minimum security. The trouble with the world is me. Try that on yourself ... me thee Adam us – with a little help from the father of lies. Blame anything, blame God even, but oh don't blame me.*⁶¹

The relationship between our main thinkers and the thought of Nietzsche remained, throughout their intellectual lives, fairly uniform. In the case of Girard, while he showed great admiration and respect for the scope of Nietzsche's insights and his orbiting around the then uncovered scapegoat mechanism, in the end he spent the majority of his career in opposition to Nietzsche's final conclusions and those of his successors. Spengler, as mentioned in the previous chapter, owed his entire early career and way of thought to Nietzsche.⁶² His system of recurrence, the Will-to-Power or Schopenhaurian *Weltwille* as the prime historical mover, and his advocacy for the "Great Men" of history, all owe their allegiance to Nietzsche's propositions. At a cursory glance it could be argued that the real opposition between Spengler's and Girard's work is that the former, representing a schematised Nietzschean view of history in which the rise and decline of cultures is eternally recurring, would stand in sharp contrast to the latter, who believes that the revelation of the Gospels, the progressive breakdown of the violent sacred, is unfolding through the course of history toward a definite end: the apocalypse.

⁶¹ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 326-327.

⁶² And, of course, Goethe.

Here, it would seem, Girard is aligned with Hegel, who similarly believed that history was the unfolding of the *Weltgeist* that was steadily progressing towards its perfection.

However, in an analogous fashion, both Spengler and Girard, in the tail ends of their careers, and in their final few works, show a sudden change in their outlook with regards to those who had informed their philosophic world-view. In the case of Spengler, an attempt is made to revise his philosophy of history drastically by expanding his scope of inquiry. It seems strange that someone so self-assured in his Copernican revolution of thought would need to revise and change so much of his early thought; however, the “avalanche of criticism”⁶³ and his rise to prominence as an “infallible prophet”⁶⁴ and participant in interwar political controversies required some significant revision if he was to remain the world-history analyst *en vogue*.

This revision to his work is one of the more under-studied aspects of his oeuvre since, firstly, “he failed to present his new vision of world history in a large-scale, systematically organised work”⁶⁵ and, secondly, he also failed to concede that his original vision required substantial alterations. These two reasons “compounded the difficulty encountered by scholars in perceiving the remarkable transformation in his ideas,”⁶⁶ while they continued to believe that “virtually everything of importance its author had to say about world history,”⁶⁷ was transcribed in his *The Decline of the West*. What we do see, however, when we survey his late-career and posthumously released works is a definite expansion and alteration to his original scheme. Spengler no longer maintains a position of “methodical, philosophical relativism” in which “his philosophy of world history is only valid for denizens of Western

⁶³ Farrenkopf, “The Transformation of Spengler’s Philosophy of World History,” 466.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

civilisation,”⁶⁸ but, rather, “in bold Hegelian fashion,”⁶⁹ he asserts that “the process of world history has finally achieved the necessary stage of maturity, which permits the comprehension of its essence.”⁷⁰ Spengler, who had previously argued that all history was the history of the rise and decline of cultures, expands his scope of inquiry to include prehistory and early civilizational history in the interest of ascertaining, “the overall pattern of world history, the main forces which produce it, and the underlying meaning of world history concealed behind the phenomenal façade of historical events.”⁷¹ In *The Decline of the West*, Spengler shows a disinterest in the cultural significance of prehistory and early civilizational history arguing, instead, that early man/woman formed the largely undifferentiated foundation upon which the high cultures arose,⁷² and asserting that, prior to the emergence of high cultures, humankind had merely manifested the “primeval spiritual condition of an eternal-childlike humanity,”⁷³ In his revised scheme, the history of cultures, which previously represented all history, now only represented a late stage in the full development of human creativity and rationality. Spengler modifies his history by going hundreds of thousands of years back into time in order to try to locate the very beginnings of hominization, adding new mineralogic⁷⁴ terms to previously unconsidered historical epochs, including “lava,” “crystal” and “amoeba,”⁷⁵ in the effort to identify a common human destiny beyond the original cultural individualism he presents in *The Decline*.⁷⁶ Against his previous strongly

⁶⁸ Ibid., 468.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 469.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Spengler was, for a short time, a student of minerology.

⁷⁵ Paleolithic, Late Paleolithic/Neolithic, Late Neolithic, respectively.

⁷⁶ “The epoch of [...] lava is one of first beginnings, when the first representatives of the human race are dramatically expelled upon the surface of the Earth like lava during the eruption of a volcano. The age of [...] crystal witnesses human psychological awakening, the birth of instinctual comprehension, the transition from formless into form, when light penetrates into the human soul. In the era of “c” [amoeba] culture this phase of coming-to-

individualistic assertions that cultures had no real admixture or significant influence on the other, Spengler begins to proclaim the fluidity of early, pre-cultural humanity and the way in which three “amoebic” cultures – the Atlantean, Kush and Turan – intermixed to lay the foundation for later Graeco-Roman, Aryan Indian and Chinese high cultures.⁷⁷

Casting aside all fair criticisms to his historicity,⁷⁸ Spengler produces an updated philosophical anthropology which, ignoring the individual fates of cultures that was the motive of his first book, seeks to unite all cultures under a common destiny. Here, I defer to Farrenkopf’s description of Spengler’s new, universal philosophical anthropology:

Man rises in defiance of the natural world because of a primordial contradiction in his makeup. He is animated with the spirit of a proud beast of prey (*Herrentier*), like that of an “eagle, lion, [or] tiger,” yet is distinguished by a degree of physical weakness on a par with that of animals who comprise the prey of carnivores (*Beutetier*). This constitutional incongruity is the source of his tragedy. While Rousseau imagines man in the hypothesized state of nature to be a superlative physical specimen and detects no incipient, irresolvable conflict between man and the natural environment in the process of civilisational development, Spengler conceives of primitive man as finding himself in a condition of relative, corporeal “powerlessness,” which contrasts sharply

consciousness deepens, human beings become aware of themselves as individuals, languages arise, tribes of a couple thousand people take shape and collective human enterprise emerges” (Farrenkopf, “The Transformation of Spengler’s Philosophy of World History,” 470).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 471.

⁷⁸ Spengler’s, like Nietzsche’s, rejection of Darwin’s theory of natural selection in favour of De Vries’ mutation theory disallowed the idea that humans underwent a gradual biological evolution. Secondly, Spengler claimed the first representatives of the human race appeared somewhere around 100,000 years ago, which recent paleontological and archeological work has identified as occurring, perhaps, 2 million years earlier. Lastly, Spengler rejected that Paleolithic humankind engaged in any significant social intercourse, which is contrary to recent anthropological reports. See (Farrenkopf, “The Transformation of Spengler’s Philosophy of World History,” 471).

with his high intellectual aptitude. Through the process of civilisational development man strives to resolve this existential dilemma, compensating for his physical weakness and vulnerability through the cultivation and employment of his powerful intellect. “The entire existence of the human race is [directed towards] the overcoming of its powerlessness. Thus, culture is not the harmonious teleological end of history as Kant has speculated, but “the weapon of the weak against nature.”⁷⁹

Whereas *The Decline of the West* introduced an aesthetic vision of the harmony of eternal rise and decline, the later Spengler contends that the entirety of human history is deeply tragic. Whereas in his biological analogy of history, cultures grew from the “soil” of history as differentiated representatives of the same species, following each other in the eternally recurring cycle of nature without forming an overarching meaning, his later works, taking into account the dynamism and relationship with nature of the Faustian/Western culture, identify history as accelerating the tempo at which significant historical developments take place. The history of civilisation is “likened to a thoroughly destructive irreversible and accelerating process, which is typified by the manifestation of an increasing magnitude of energy and mass and driven towards an identifiable terminus.”⁸⁰ In identifying human history as a clash of human will against nature, Spengler ramps up his rhetoric of the impending ecological disaster he believes will be the death-knell of all humanity. Spengler, in originally trying to reject Hegel, begins to take on a more Hegelian scheme with some Nietzschean embellishments. While for Hegel world history was the progressive expression of human rationality, Spengler viewed history as attesting to the primacy of human irrationality and will:

⁷⁹ Ibid., 472.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 477.

For Hegel world history is the triumphant march of the *Weltgeist*, for Spengler, a student of Hegel's archrival Schopenhauer, it is the march of the *Weltwille*, the tragic, irrational odyssey of human will towards catastrophe. The world will is the irresistible, daemonic ethos which shapes human history contrary to rational criteria, in opposition to humankind's wishes that it could be otherwise and to its frustrated ideals.⁸¹

While history can never reach an end point in Nietzsche's teaching of eternal return, for Spengler, his "successor in German cultural pessimism,"⁸² the will and instinctual energy of human beings "[...] power world history towards its ineluctable end."⁸³ History is no longer the domain of humankind and its rise and decline of cultures. Rather, humankind and the history of high cultures serve as footnotes in greater world history. In his "second," updated philosophy of world history, Spengler considers the deeply tragic history of humanity as only constituting a mere episode in world-destiny. No longer are the episodes of cultural rise and decline a discontinued series of unrelated scenes; for the later Spengler they represent "but the final act in the epic tragedy of humankind."⁸⁴ In fact, according to Spengler, the current era in which we find ourselves represents the conclusion of his world-history, when he states in *Man and Technics*, "Today we stand on the summit, at the point when the fifth act is beginning. The last decisions are taking place, the tragedy is closing."⁸⁵

It was ambiguous whether the end of modern civilisation would mean the wholesale demise of humankind in the later works of Spengler; nonetheless, we see that world-history for Spengler has manifested into "an over-arching line of development which spans the

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 478.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 480.

⁸⁵ Spengler, *Man and Technics*, 46.

individual cultures. The high-cultural plurality surveyed in *The Decline of the West* is placed within a larger framework in which world history forms, to a significant degree, a unified process. The very fact of the emergence of the genus of high culture as a civilisational stage was adjudged to be a mere incident in his main work; now, it is seen as a necessary act in the awesome spectacle of humanity's revolt against the natural world."⁸⁶

Like the later Girard, who I shall examine shortly, this period for Spengler represents his shift towards apocalyptic thought. By integrating his two philosophies of history from his early *The Decline of the West* and later works, there emerges an "upward-spiralling model of the world-historical process which climaxes in apocalypse."⁸⁷ In Spengler's final scheme, the cultural decline of the West no longer represents the magnificent exhaustion of its possibilities in the emergent epoch of world history – a macro-historical event with no significant ramifications for the course of world history – but, rather, its ultimate phase.⁸⁸

From a biographical perspective, what is interesting about this second phase of Spengler's philosophy of world-history is his shift in attitude in response to his new schema. As mentioned previously in this writing, the early Spengler, while presenting a vision in which Western civilisation is hurtling towards decline, nonetheless downplayed the inherent pessimism of his work. In his 1921 essay *Pessimismus?* replying to accusations of said pessimism, Spengler replied, "No, I am not a pessimist. Pessimism means: not seeing anymore tasks. I see so many still unsolved [...]"⁸⁹ Twelve years later, having written both *Man and Technics* and *Hour of Decision*, Spengler labels his position a *strong* pessimism,⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Farrenkopf, "The Transformation of Spengler's Philosophy of World History", 481.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Oswald Spengler, "Pessimismus?" in *Reden und Aufsätze*. (Munich: Hofenberg, 1921): 62-79.

⁹⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Hour of Decision: Germany and World-Historical Evolution*. (New York; New York: Routledge, 2017), 8.

or *brave* pessimism,⁹¹ a pessimism equipped with the “hard recognition of historical fact,”⁹² detested by the “soft, uncontrolled natures”⁹³ of his time while, at the same time, holding in it the “contempt for mankind of all great fact-men who *know* mankind” – a pessimism separated from the “cowardly pessimism of small and weary souls which fear life and bear to look at reality.”⁹⁴ In the face of the coming crisis,⁹⁵ the brave pessimist⁹⁶ understands that history is “tragic, permeated by destiny, and in consequence, meaningless, aimless and unmoral”:⁹⁷

The individual's life is of importance to none besides himself: the point is whether he wishes to escape from history or give his life for it. History reckons nothing of human logic. Thunderstorms, earthquakes, lava-streams: these are near relatives of the purposeless, elemental events of world history⁹⁸

Although Spengler makes use of a Hegelian scheme of philosophical-historical progress in his later career, he clings to his Nietzschean allegiances, essentially colouring Hegelian historicity with Nietzschean ideology. In adapting an apocalyptic world-view in his later writing, Spengler can no longer rely on an historical scheme that promotes a never-ending cycle of self-contained cultural birth and death, especially when coming face-to-face with the

⁹¹ Ibid., 11.

⁹² Ibid., 8.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Specifically, for Spengler, “the” crisis at this stage of his writing is elaborated on and seems to comprise the then “World-economical crisis” of his time; explicitly, “in production, in unemployment, in war debts and reparations, in home or foreign policy” (Spengler, *Hour of Decision*, 23), and the twin revolutions of class and race which will fight side by side as allies in what will be “the severest crisis through which the white peoples will have to pass in common” (Spengler, *Hour of Decision*, 204).

⁹⁶ This “brand” of pessimism, for the late Spengler, also has racial overtones in the sense that it is specifically connected to the Western-Nordic soul-feeling which has always exhibited the tragic in its poetry and therefore represented the “deepest form” of *brave* pessimism.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

possibility of history's "tragic" end. Spengler's only recourse is to adapt the only other philosophical-historical scheme available to him: that of historical progressivism. However, writing a century and a half after Hegel and witnessing first-hand the utopian visions of the German Idealists crumble in the face of the Great War, and clinging to his Schopenhauerian/Nietzschean influences, Spengler's only viable position is to "bravely" capitulate to the tragic mechanism of fate which has placed us within the end-times of history: to yield one's free-will to destiny. Contradictorily, or, perhaps due to the schematic shift towards a version of Hegelian progressivism which, as argued above, views history-as-crisis and sees in crises opportunities for world-historical shaping, Spengler also begins retreating toward warring tribalism: his final work, *Hour of Decision*, calls "Prussians" to arms in order that they usher in the new era of historically prefigured Caesarism⁹⁹ that succeeds the equally prefigured period of civilisation-destroying bloodshed. The scale of this bloodshed, Spengler recognises, will be global, as he identifies the decline of "white" western culture coinciding with its being overrun by the "coloured world" – continuing the analogy of the West with the Roman Imperium and its fall to "barbarians." There is an important difference this time, however:

the *orbis terrarum* of the Roman Empire was an enclosed area with frontiers that could be guarded. The position of the present Imperium of the white nations, which embraces the whole globe and includes the coloured races, is far more difficult. White humanity has scattered itself to all quarters in its ungovernable urge to infinite distance: over both Americas, South Africa, Australia, and innumerable strategic points between. The Yellow-Brown-Black-Red menace lurks within the field of the white power.

⁹⁹ Spengler, *Hour of Decision*, 263.

In the face of an apocalyptic ending to Western culture that will see its global implosion in racial violence,¹⁰⁰ pacifism, like optimism, is cowardice to Spengler, who believes “the outcry against war” is a “serious abdication from history at the cost of dignity, honour [and] liberty,”¹⁰¹ especially when “the coloured races are *not* pacifists.”¹⁰² “Life *is* war,”¹⁰³ Spengler goes on to say, and so it is only the “warlike, ‘Prussian’ spirit” which has the “formative power”¹⁰⁴ to resurrect the Imperium. When, as Heraclitus writes, “war is the father of all and king of all,”¹⁰⁵ and since Spengler did his best to represent history as the Logos of Heraclitus, it is no surprise that, in the end, he would conflate war with creation.

Girard, Hegel and the Apocalyptic Turn

*The “account” I was quoting, Sir Philosopher, was not an account of the manner of creation, but an account of the manner of the temptation that led to the fall. Did that escape you? Why do you take delight in leaping to such wild conjecture from so fragile a springboard? Why do you wish to discredit the past, even to dehumanizing the last civilisation? So that you need not learn from their mistakes? Or can it be that you can’t bear being only a “rediscoverer,” and must feel that you are “creator” as well?*¹⁰⁶

Though Spengler at first rejected Hegelianism, he found in it the only retreat available to someone who, in the end, could not accept the fate he supposedly subscribed to. The relationship between mimetic theory and Hegelianism, however, is a little more complicated,

¹⁰⁰ Concurrent with the other crises Spengler views as most threatening: the economic and ecological.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ René Girard, “On War and Apocalypse”. *First Things*. August, 2009.

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/08/on-war-and-apocalypse>

¹⁰⁶ Miller, *A Cantic for Leibowitz*, 231.

and even after Girard's death there is still some debate as to where Girard positioned mimetic theory in relation to Hegel's propositions.

As early as 1978, Swiss theologian Raymund Schwager recognised, "surprising analogies between Hegel's constantly recurring theme of dialectical self-alienation and Girard's analyses of self-projection, of the double, and of mimetic rivalry";¹⁰⁷ so much so that he believed a comparative study of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* alongside Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* would benefit future generations of researchers.¹⁰⁸ While Girard's critical debates with Nietzschean thinkers are well observed, his struggle, if any, with Hegelianism "seems to have been the most difficult."¹⁰⁹ One of the reasons identified by Wilmes seems to be related to the issues I discuss above, that is, that proponents of Hegelianism, as one of the predominant academic theories, as with Nietzscheanism, reject any author who cannot be reduced to either a 19th century rejectionist of German Idealism or to the framework of modern French anti-Hegelianism.¹¹⁰ Another reason, and a more pertinent one, is Girard's own concern with confronting Hegelianism and his uncertainty with regards to how far he should approach the matter. In his own words, Girard states that during the writing of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, he "cannot deny that Hegel was in the background,"¹¹¹ and he was even hoped, by some, to be the successor of Kojève, seen as he was to be presenting a "new version of Hegelian thought" or a "reformulation of the desire for recognition in Hegel's theory."¹¹² During this stage in his career, Girard admits that he

¹⁰⁷ Andreas Wilmes, "Portrait of René Girard as a Post-Hegelian: Masters, Slaves, and Monstrous Doubles" *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol. I, Issue 1, (2017): 57.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹¹⁰ Which was, during Spengler's time, also unavailable to him.

¹¹¹ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 31.

¹¹² Ibid., 30.

“felt an affinity with Hegel’s philosophy,”¹¹³ and while he “fought back like a demon”¹¹⁴ at the suggestion that his “ideas were obsolete and referred to stale debates,”¹¹⁵ “he ‘did not dare’ to demonstrate what he refers to as the ‘prosaic’ [...] difference distinguishing his own conception of desire from the famous struggle for recognition introduced in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.”¹¹⁶

Nonetheless, while there are, of course, key differences in their theories even at this formative stage of mimetic theory, a real break with Hegel seems to occur in Girard’s confrontation with Clausewitz in *Battling to the End*. While, as Wilmes points out, the differences become much clearer in Girard’s unique critique of Hegelianism in the context of French philosophy,¹¹⁷ I intend to limit my discussion to “the critique of Hegel’s views on international wars and its confrontation with the work of Carl von Clausewitz”¹¹⁸ via Girard, as this confrontation best highlights the concerns in this thesis regarding crisis and the apocalypse.

O’Regan writes that the theme of *Battling to the End* is the apocalyptic, and that “Girard gives us some reason to believe [apocalyptic] could be the interpretive key of the book.”¹¹⁹ For this reason, to some degree, Gardner believes *Battling to the End* to be Girard’s “most ambitious book since *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, and it is bound to be his most provocative too.”¹²⁰ It is in this book in which Girard “brings to full expression the

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Wilmes, “Portrait of Girard as a Post-Hegelian: Masters, Slaves and Monstrous Doubles”, 58.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Cyril O’Regan, “Girard and the Spaces of Apocalyptic” *Modern Theology* 28:1 (January, 2012), 113.

¹²⁰ Stephen Gardner, “René Girard’s Apocalyptic Critique or Historical Reason: Limiting Politics to Make Way for Faith” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, Vol. 18 (2011): 1.

deeply apocalyptic bent of his thought,”¹²¹ and, while this bent was “there from the start in his Pascalian sensibility,”¹²² the “full-blown apocalyptic emphasis of *Battling to the End*”¹²³ seems to exceed, rather than be continuous with, his earlier sensibilities. What is it that triggers this shift toward “full-blown” apocalyptic in Girard?

The word apocalypse means “unveiling.”¹²⁴ “What, then, is veiled, the unveiling of which can have apocalyptic consequences?”¹²⁵ According to Bailie, via Girard, “the answer is: violence.”¹²⁶ For Girard, “Hegelian thought has tragic aspects, but no catastrophic ones,”¹²⁷ and it is the further unveiling of veiled violence¹²⁸ via his contact with Clausewitz that reveals the catastrophic potentialities of apocalyptic violence, which “once shorn of its religious and historical justifications [...] cannot sufficiently distinguish itself from the counter-violence it opposes. Without benefit of religious and cultural privilege, violence simply does what unveiled violence always does: it incites more violence.”¹²⁹

“The danger in Hegel’s thought,” states Girard, “comes paradoxically from the fact that it does not begin with a sufficiently radical conception of violence.”¹³⁰ For Girard, Hegel’s categorical mistake turns out to be an anthropological misconception.¹³¹ While these misconceptions become clearer through their differing conceptions of reciprocal recognition

¹²¹ Ibid., 4.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ O’Regan, “Girard and the Spaces of Apocalyptic” 113.

¹²⁴ Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 15.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 29.

¹²⁸ “Veiled violence is violence whose religious or historical justifications still provide it with an aura of respectability and give it a moral and religious monopoly over any ‘unofficial’ violence whose claim to ‘official’ status pre-empts it.” (Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 15)

¹²⁹ Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 15.

¹³⁰ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 32.

¹³¹ Wilmes, “Portrait of Girard as a Post-Hegelian: Masters, Slaves and Monstrous Doubles,” 72.

and the master/slave dialectic,¹³² it is when confronted with Clausewitz that these philosophical differences become more recognisable for Girard. On the insistence of Raymond Aron¹³³ today's *faux* Clausewitzians seem to have "lost sight of a critical Clausewitzian distinction ... between the military objective and the political end."¹³⁴ According to Girard, Aron treated "absolute war" as "nothing but a concept"¹³⁵ since Aron perceived a "break" between Chapter 1 Book 1 of Clausewitz's "On the Nature of War" and the rest of the treatise. In this Chapter, titled "What is War?," Clausewitz starts with a definition of war as a *duel*. Since "intelligence must serve force,"¹³⁶ and "War is [...] an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,"¹³⁷ and any "indirect strategy (that of manoeuvres rather than battle) is an admission of weakness,"¹³⁸ there is no rational viability in controlling the violence inherent in a duel and, by extension, war. What this leads to, in Clausewitz's mind, is a description of a duel as a "trend to extremes":

Even the most civilised of peoples, in short, can be fired with passionate hatred of each other [...] The thesis, then, must be repeated: war is an act of force, and *there is no logical limit to the application of that force*. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory, to extremes. This is the *first case of action and the first "extreme" we meet with*.¹³⁹

In insisting on his "break" above, Aron was only taking the initiative of Clausewitz himself who, later in the treatise, begins to label the above "trend to extremes" as a "logical

¹³² For the sake of brevity we will not be including these arguments. See (Wilmes, "Portrait of Girard as a Post Hegelian: Masters, Slaves and Monstrous Doubles", 61-69).

¹³³ Gardner, "René Girard's Apocalyptic Critique of Historical Reason," 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 6.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

fantasy” and “pure concept”¹⁴⁰ which does not correspond to historical reality. From a Girardian perspective, the continued insistence of the “trend to extremes” and “absolute war” as pure concepts is a grave error. Gardner, for example, states:

In effect, they have replaced politics with war, the end with the means, as if that afforded a certainty that in reality it no longer does. The larger political aims that war is supposed to serve - assuming it is not an end in itself - are eclipsed by military objectives. Or they are temporized indefinitely, as in the phrase “the war on terror,” which dissolves any definable political end into an abstraction.¹⁴¹

For Girard, though, the first chapter, which Clausewitz seems to regret,¹⁴² and which Aron chose to treat as conceptual, gripped him. It was the definition of war as a duel that trends to extremes that “fascinates and frightens” Girard because “his [Clausewitz’s] definition of a duel [...] is consistent with my analyses and applied them to history with a force that I had not imagined.”¹⁴³ In his analysis, it is the escalation to extremes which, in the end, makes Girard reject Hegelianism,¹⁴⁴ as it reveals the unconscious apocalyptic reasoning that always makes violence grow when not renounced straight away. This renunciation of violence is not possible in the Hegelian scheme, since human conflict, while destructive, is seen as ultimately positive. Hegel believed in humanity and the reconciliation of all people, and Girard himself was a “victim”¹⁴⁵ of this ideology: he too believed that universal knowledge of violence should sufficiently bring this reconciliation about. Of course, Hegel saw the “terrible alternative of kill or be killed,”¹⁴⁶ but, it can be said, his faith in the human spirit and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴¹ Gardner, “René Girard’s Apocalyptic Critique of Historical Reason”, 3.

¹⁴² Girard, *Battling to the End*, 6.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

reconciliation disallowed a vision in which human violence escalated towards the apocalyptic – which history itself increasingly shows is the direction violence takes us towards. In the words of Girard,

They hope that everything will be resolved at the end of history... We have seen that Hegel thought that a world state would emerge out of inter-state conflicts. Likewise, modern forms of wisdom have not wanted to give up seeing bad reciprocity as the precursor of good reciprocity. However, this alibi of the last remaining obstacle to be overcome before reconciliation, this means of postponing universal peace, has necessarily made violence grow. *More violence is always needed before reconciliation.* Auschwitz and Hiroshima have reminded us of this ... Violence can never reduce violence. Yet humans refuse to see the catastrophe they are preparing by always introducing new differences and new conflicts. This misapprehension is simply part of mimeticism which is denial of our own violence.¹⁴⁷

With this in view, it would seem that Girard is allied to Clausewitz, that, in some way, Clausewitz's disputation of Hegelian historicity provides Girard with a firm foundation from which to begin synthesising his previous work with his final intellectual pursuit – to understand mimetic history in order to understand the immanent crisis and the possibility of avoiding it. This was not the case. While Girard believes that Clausewitz's intuition regarding the true nature of the duel as the trend to extremes is revelatory, and the implications dire, when it pertains to how Clausewitz treats this revelation himself and how he relegates it to abstraction, Girard's endorsements cease. The issue for Girard is that Clausewitz revealed the reciprocal nature of violence while remaining ambivalent about war in general. When conceptualising war as a duel that trends to extremes, Clausewitz has announced, "the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

imminent dictatorship of violence”;¹⁴⁸ yet his response is to take refuge “in a description of the rules of war as if it were still in the eighteenth century, as if war were still an institution.”¹⁴⁹

What we see in Clausewitz’s response to his own insight is not the unveiling of violence that his intuitions are suggesting but rather, at least according to Girard, a retreat into statism and the rational. Girard saw Clausewitz as a prudent man who was both in the service of the Tsar’s armies and taught at the Military Academy, and this prudence required Clausewitz to stifle the intuition that would see military, and by extension, all violence escalate to the point of extremes. Rather, Clausewitz chooses to propose a second definition of war¹⁵⁰ in the hope, at least according to Girard, that he could convince the reader that we were still in the period of a classical conflict between states and that politics could still control war. This meant, for Girard, that Clausewitz was trying to “hide the duel behind a rational definition of war.”¹⁵¹

This is problematic for Girard for two key reasons. The first and immediate concern is that the modern state within which Girard was writing is different from the state of Clausewitz’s time. Being a staunch believer in Prussianism and the Prussian state, Clausewitz seems tentatively allied to this “less abstract” definition because it still allowed room for reason and intelligence within the state to assuage the passions of its polity toward violence, and for it to maintain a balance between these three tendencies: “like an object suspended between three magnets.”¹⁵² The second problem for Girard is rooted in his perception that what Clausewitz disregards in his own thought as abstraction does not negate the historical reality of what his abstractions have uncovered; that is, that “history is accelerating beyond our control” and that

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ In this definition, Clausewitz describes war as a “remarkable trinity” – a blend of passions, calculation and intelligence.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 54.

“we have to accept that its course will increasingly escape rational management.”¹⁵³ This “retreat” back into a political definition of war represents for Girard not an acceptance of this inevitability but, rather, it resembles in some sense “the way that primitive societies used to hide their violence behind myth.”¹⁵⁴ At this stage a brief connection to Spengler can be made who, as mentioned above, also shares these sentiments regarding the Prussian state and the importance of politics therein to wage war in the interest of furthering power. For Spengler, politics is not only the means of manipulating violence towards its own ends, but “is the highest and most powerful dimension of all historical existence. World history is the history of states; the history of states is the history of wars.” For Spengler, the engine of history itself is created through the political and, by extension, through war. All of this is expressed in his essay “Prussianism and Socialism,” in which he uses his evocative language to champion the ideology of his peculiar form of Prussian socialism. Clausewitz, similarly, has faith that the institutional warfare of his state, guided by the ideas of the Enlightenment, could control the war-as-duel with which he began his treatise.

This highlights, in brief, the major issues that Girard has with Clausewitz’s work; however, on a deeper level, these issues also reveal to Girard the way in which ideology in the modern world has replaced myth while essentially functioning in the same way. Girard writes: “Ideology has replaced mythology, but the mechanisms are similar.”¹⁵⁵ In light of our overall conversation, what Girard is revealing with this attitude of Clausewitz’s and, similarly, Spengler and Hegel, is the way in which, when confronted with a crisis in which violence is becoming more and more a part of the equation, these thinkers must stifle their

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

abstract intuitions in favour of a retreat into ideology – a refuge of lies.¹⁵⁶ This is of importance to Girard as he is of the opinion that Clausewitz, rather than talking just about war, is speaking deeply about society in general and the way that “what he said about warlike reciprocity [...] intersects with what mimetic theory has concluded from observing social mechanisms.”¹⁵⁷ This broadens the crisis to not only absorbing the sphere of politics and military manoeuvring but to the very mechanisms of social cohesion itself. What these ideologies refuse to acknowledge – whether it’s Hegel’s optimistic Idealism, Clausewitz’s military Realism or Spengler’s racial-political war mongering – is Girard’s conviction that “the clash between two armies is consistent with the logic of human relations ... the escalation to extremes is thus an implacable law.”¹⁵⁸ They all seem to overlook the truth about violence as it had been revealed in Napoleon’s actions.¹⁵⁹ These ideologies could not or, perhaps, would not conceive of the immanence of the duel behind contingent history, as this threatened the rationalism they championed. In their schema and their respective zeitgeist, rationality could still claim sovereignty over their passions; however, what history has shown, and what Girard is explicit in repeating, is that in these ideological applications, such as in Hitler’s attempt at manifesting Prussian socialism into a historical reality, what we see is not a duel suspended and subdued intermittently in favour of rational deliberation but, rather, violence and murder at historically unprecedented levels, as witnessed during the Holocaust and concomitant and subsequent genocides and atrocities.

For Girard, politics can never resolve the tension between the escalation to extremes and its attempt at stifling the nature of reciprocal action to intensify into apocalyptic violence,

¹⁵⁶ If, as stated by Girard, ideology functions as myth, and Bandera has labelled refuge in myth as a refuge in lies, then, in the same spirit, we must also extend this definition to modern ideologies which have “replaced” myth.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

particularly in the modern, globalised milieu. This attempt, for Girard, is akin to primitive societies and their refuge in a mythology which also aimed, through prohibitions and so on, to stem the flow of reciprocation and vengeance when, in reality, they were merely “casting out Satan with Satan.”

In this chapter we have explored the two main “pillars” of modern philosophical enquiry into the meaning and process of history, and what we have discovered is an allegiance between these two seemingly disparate philosophies and their function as mythologising or veiling the mimetic mechanism that has been the engine of history. On the one hand, in the case of the post-Nietzscheans, above, we see a rejection of historical enquiry in favour of a metaphysical myth-making; one that treats with silence the Nietzschean problem of Dionysius versus the Crucified, and continues in its own way to re-mythologise the revelations that the Gospel texts laid bare with regards to scapegoating and the innocence of those victimised. On the other hand, in the case of post-Hegelian historicity, we see a rejection of abstractions concerning the reciprocal nature of war as a duel in favour of a hyper-rationalism that would see political-ideologies function as myth; that in some way through a reliance on the rational-political method one could control the movement of history toward one’s own preferences and ideological allies while also strengthening social cohesion. We have also seen how, when faced with the apocalypse, Spengler oscillates intermittently between both in the hope of finding an ideological anchor.

In both cases, however, it is the phenomenon of crises and how they have played out in historical terms that lays bare the underlying instability of their thought. Although both philosophies seem to approach the event horizon, so to speak, of a violent crisis, in the end they retreat into a refuge of lies to stifle the intuition that both philosophies seem to come close to grasping but either choose not to engage with or find too abstract to entertain due to the elevation of instrumental reason. So, what does this mean for our enquiry here, and does

Girard provide us with an alternative vision with which to work from in order to avoid the crisis that the other philosophies would have us treat as imaginary?

We will conclude this dissertation with these thoughts.

Conclusion

Are we doomed to it, Lord, chained to the pendulum of our own mad clockwork, helpless to halt its swing? This time, it will swing us clean to oblivion, he thought.¹

Where's the truth? What is to be believed? Or does it matter at all? When mass murder's been answered with mass murder, rape with rape, hate with hate, there's no longer much meaning in asking whose axe is bloodier. Evil, on evil, piled on evil.²

The purpose of this dissertation was not so much to focus on Girard's solution to the crisis he had identified but to initiate a conversation wherein mimetic theory could be transposed within the realm of a philosophy of history, and the notion of historical crises examined through this lens. I did this by superimposing mimetic theory over the work of Oswald Spengler who, as I have argued, has many areas of theoretical over-lap with Girard's work and, it could be said, has had many of his claims vindicated by the passage of time. This made Spengler a prime candidate for the task as Spengler not only represented a formidable thinker within the field, but also represented in their synergism in him, some problems with what I have labelled the twin pillars of modern philosophical-historical thought and their interpretations of history. As we saw, in Spengler's account, the approaching crisis left Spengler swinging from stoic passivity toward calls to violent action. It was argued that the currently predominating philosophies of post-Nietzscheanism and post-Hegelianism, and their visions concerning the meaning of history, disallowed Spengler to retreat into any other refuge apart from those of deterministic fatalism or historical-critique turned future-shaping when faced with an apocalyptic crisis. The case against both options was made in the

¹ Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 265.

² *Ibid.*, 278-279.

previous chapter. In the case of the former, Spengler revealed through his actions that the optimistic Stoicism he championed in his early career was unrealistic because the continuing decline of Western civilisation had him renege on his previous fatalistic convictions in favour of a call for his fellow Prussians to take history into their own hands through war. As Spengler moved into the realm of the latter, the weakness was revealed by Girard's analysis of Clausewitz's assertions regarding the nature of the duel and its reciprocity versus Hegel's idealistic vision of violence as a necessary evil. If, as Spengler asserts, Prussia must harness violence towards its own ends, Girard, via Clausewitz, reminds us that the nature of war, even political *détente*, is tied to a mechanism aimed only towards its own escalation. Spengler, in this scenario, is caught in a paradox: either impartially accept your fate within history and witness the violent decline of Western, and by extension, global civilisation, or use violence toward your own ends which will, in turn, allow violence to escalate beyond all control so that one can witness the violent decline of Western, and by extension global, civilisation. In Spengler's vision, the personal choice to be made is to have the strength of will to accept historical death or, when sitting on your hands fails, so to speak, to use the force of will, through violence and war, to shape history in your vision in the hopes of delaying or overcoming historical death, something heretofore never realised by any civilisation. Based on my argument in the preceding chapter, my contention remains that Spengler, in the intellectual milieu within which he was writing, and which arguably still dominates today, was unable to formulate any other solution to the crisis – one he intuitively began suspecting of being apocalyptic – due to the weaknesses revealed through their misunderstanding of the immanent and apocalyptic nature of the coming crisis and their ignorance of the mimetic mechanism. Furthermore, I contend that all philosophies of history which have approached this subject, whether it is the end of history or overcoming of history,

have necessarily landed on conclusions which are analogous to either of Spengler's assertions, whether the young optimist or the older hyper-pessimist.

Naturally, out of this analysis the question arises as to what Girard's theories could offer with regards to the possibility of overcoming an apocalyptic crisis. This is a question that goes beyond the scope of this thesis and one which would require separate treatment for what I identify to be two main reasons: the first is that what Girard indirectly prescribes to escape the mimetic mechanism within history could only represent speculation as such a historical milieu has never been realised and has, therefore, no precedent and no method outside of speculation with which to investigate; the second, related to the first, is that the methods required to investigate a scenario of a civilisation overcoming the mimetic crisis turned apocalypse must be those that allow consideration for non-historical explanations. This is not to suppose that Girard does not offer many clues for us in his own reflections on the problem, though these are, admittedly, few and far between. On the contrary, in the few explicit reflections on a way beyond this historical mechanism, Girard unequivocally states that it has already been done for us and that a historical model exists for us to imitate. The problem with this statement, for many, is that the solution for Girard is to be found in the Christian New Testament. This is problematic for those looking to find historical solutions to historical problems, particularly when a holy book is being invoked as the problem-solver. If anything, for Girard, it was the New Testament that first revealed this problem, and it is the New Testament in which the solution is found. The Passion of the Christ and, especially, his resurrection represents, for Girard, the permanent establishment of the victim's perspective in history. This freed humanity from our previous reliance on the scapegoat mechanism by revealing its illusory nature and showing the scapegoat to be a victim persecuted as part of an unconscious social mechanism. The paradox, however, is that we are now prey to the mechanism in a way we had never been before. As mentioned in the first chapter on Girard,

with full knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism, we can no longer rely on it as a unifying or creative force; however, due to our immemorial alliance with it, we are still, consciously or unconsciously, drawn towards it. The temptation for persecutory violence and for the violent transferral of energy onto a victim is still strong, however; that we can misunderstand any part of the process and remain ignorant of it is an impossibility, so too any regenerative outcome. This is what Girard means when he argues that a global mimetic crisis, much like a global version of Spengler's period of contending states, would represent the apocalypse. It was just mentioned that the scope of this answer is too large to approach, and, as one can see, the conversation was already beginning to move toward theology; nevertheless, a few choice sections of Girard's work can provide us, here, with an introductory and exploratory glimpse into his thoughts on the matter and initiate a conversation on possible directions for work of this kind.

In an earlier chapter, Girard was quoted indicating that he feels that history is a test for humanity and that we are failing it. What does he mean by this? As I have just mentioned, the events of the Gospels dispelled all myths surrounding violence, while our temptations toward said violence remains in place. Since the New Testament, however, it seems that we have continued to place our hopes in it as we continue to remain ignorant of the duel as the underlying structure of all human activities. Christ, for Girard, has placed humanity before a terrible alternative: either continue to refuse to see the duel as the underlying structure or escape from that logic by means of another – love. Girard writes:

This is the real paradox that we have to try to understand, for from now it will not be the scapegoat who is judged guilty, but humanity itself, by history. We are thus

entering into an eschatological perspective, which is the only one that can shed light on our situation today.³

For Girard, Christianity freed us from our “sacrificial crutches” but, simultaneously, made us responsible for our own destiny.⁴ The violence that was awoken when Christ revealed to humanity the workings of human relations and the danger of reciprocity was laid bare, unleashed and its sterility revealed in the eyes of all.⁵ Going back to our previous chapter, it can be said that Christ replaced Dionysius;⁶ violence now finds nothing and resentment continues to grow unchecked. Therefore, the only solution according to Girard is that one imitate Christ in the sense that “recognising imitation and its ambivalence seems to be the only way of feeling that it is still possible to go from reciprocity to relationship, from negative contagion to a form of positive contagion.”⁷

However, there is an ambivalence here with regards to how “imitating Christ” would work in real terms and how one would go about avoiding cases of negative contagion. The specific behaviour to imitate, according to Girard, is Christ the Son’s withdrawal with his Father. This imitation of Christ shields us from the risk of regression that is inherent to internal mediation towards the discovery of a form of mediation that Girard has called “innermost”⁸ – an inflection of internal mediation, which can always degenerate into bad reciprocity. This is the chain of “positive undifferentiation, the chain of identity” wherein imitating Christ is identifying with “the other, to efface oneself before him.”⁹ In this light, with the host of models available, it is crucial to discern the right type of model. This is where things get

³ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶ Something which Nietzsche refused to see.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹ *Ibid.*

more difficult in trying to schematise a Girardian solution to the apocalypse. Apart from Christ, the arch-model to be imitated, Girard rarely mentions examples of figures who have overcome the mimetic trap; however, there are a few cases in which explicit mention is made. In *Battling to the End*, Girard mentions Holderlin, whom he praises for his withdrawal from the temptation of mimetic modelling by forgoing competition with his model Schelling. Surrounded by the possibility of negative contagion, Holderlin instead chooses to remove himself from all occasions of mimetic rivalry by withdrawing towards Christ with whom he can have no competitive or rivalrous relation. The other, earlier, example given by Girard is found in his essay “Resurrection from the Underground” in which Girard makes an interesting case concerning Dostoevsky who, similarly, removing himself from all other occasions for mimetic modelling leading to negative contagion,¹⁰ personifies a new ideal in his literature via the figure of Alyosha Karamazov.

While this is a promising lead for us, seeing that both authors could only conceive this in literary terms does not provide staunch realists with solutions in the real world. Additionally, as we can see, these solutions have come to these authors individually and an individual solution to a collective problem is unrealistic for anyone wanting to provide a program for crisis avoidance. I am allied to Girard’s later thought that sees the need for collective reasoning toward a problem when he says that “we thus have to reason more and more at a

¹⁰ This essay is a very good example of Girard working his way towards his apocalyptic eschatology. In René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, ed. J.G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company. 1997), Girard traces Dostoevsky’s autobiographical conversion from ideologies such as Romanticism, Nationalism and Slavophilism toward a non-rivalrous relationship with Christ. Interestingly, Girard has hinted that in the case of Dostoevsky, that his autobiographical struggles towards Christ are reminiscent of “moments of a mythology of self that are displayed over almost three centuries in western Europe” (99). The idea here is that Dostoevsky’s individual account shares analogies with the general account of western Europe and, therefore, Dostoevsky’s individual overcoming could provide clues for a collective overcoming.

global level, leave behind strictly individual perspective and consider things ‘in big masses’.”
[translation modified]¹¹

So how can these individual conversions be expanded to a collective level in order to overcome the apocalypse? On this account, Girard can no longer serve us and, it can be argued, that Girard may even be against such an overcoming as he sees it as necessary to continued revelation and the completion of hominisation.¹² Nonetheless, for those inclined toward a solution, the task seems to be to find works which can help form an idea of what a universal withdrawal from negative contagion could look like and, it can be said here, that the work of Max Scheler and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn could possibly provide fruit,¹³ since both of them see in individual and collective repentance, a path toward a new means of human interrelations. This assertion is tentative at best; however, there is space for overlap here, and further study could help to create some unity with Girard’s ideas concerning the overcoming of the mimetic mechanism.

Again, this is speculative and not the major concern of this dissertation. What I have been trying to show in this dissertation is the way in which the mimetic theory of René Girard could be incorporated into a philosophy of history using Oswald Spengler’s theses as a loose framework. By using Spengler’s historical framework of cultural cycles, we were also able to show the way in which a superimposition of mimetic theory provides a historical account of the way in which Girard’s anthropological scapegoat mechanism could look in real-historical

¹¹ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 110.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

¹³ In Max Scheler, “Repentance and Rebirth” in *On the Eternal in Man*. 35-65. Somerset, NJ: AldineTransaction. 2009), Scheler provides the framework of how individual repentance and the spiritual rebirth that succeeds is, in fact, possible on a universal level while in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations” in *From under the Rubble*. 105-144. (Washington, D.C., DC: Regnery Gateway. 1989), Solzhenitsyn describes the way in which every culture has at some stage been victim and victimiser, and that a global repentance for the “sins of the father” can lay the foundations for a new ground of international relations.

terms. The primary reason for completing this exercise was to evaluate the way in which philosophies of history have dealt with the decline of a culture or civilisation for the purpose of critiquing their solutions, if any. The phenomenon by which to evaluate the current theories within this area was crisis, which, as I have argued, revealed how the predominating philosophies fail to provide a solution to the problem of a crisis whose scope is apocalyptic. By viewing these problems through the lens of mimetic theory, we can see that the failure of these philosophies to provide a resolution is due to their misunderstanding of violence and their ignorance of the role of the mimetic mechanism within history. Spengler represented for us both sides of the twin-pillars of modern philosophy as he moved from one position in his younger career, Nietzschean fatalism, to the other, Hegelian critique. By placing Girard within this conversation, we were able to show how mimetic theory can act as an interlocutor between them. On one hand, he offers a Hegelianism of a sort without the assured, triumphant victory at the end of history, nor does he offer a defeatist account. On the other hand, Girard offers us a sort of Nietzscheanism but, in his representation, without the nihilism. What Girard has revealed is both freeing but, paradoxically perhaps, more frightening. Girard does two major things here: the first, and darkest, insight offered is that it is possible that we do not have a teleology to help us out, nor do we have the assurance that everything will work out fine; the second is that he makes clear the double-sense meaning in the term *apocalypse*, that is, as a disaster which may (or may not) make us “wake up to ourselves.” While this rings of a sort of fatalism, there is a sense of freedom here as this same apocalypse throws us, again, on to ourselves. This offers us a way of seeing beyond a narrow teleology in which we, as individuals, will merely be bit-players. Rather, in a reversal of the cultural determination revealed beneath mythological systems, Girard offers the idea that human agency has truly emerged, if not a little late, on the historical stage.

What this means for us is that we are no longer victims to the whims of a historical cycle of cultural birth and decline, nor should we believe that we could control or bend this cycle to our own purposes. Rather, what a Girardian historicity shows us is that we are moving towards the apocalypse and this apocalypse can no longer be appeased by our unconscious use of the scapegoat mechanism. “Humanity is more than ever the author of its own fall because it has become able to destroy its world,”¹⁴ says Girard; therefore, we must awaken our consciences, recognise our own agency, and choose the love that Girard champions in order to defeat the violence of history.

¹⁴ Girard, *Battling to the End*, 217.

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