

*John Brownlee*

## GETTING ALONG WITH SPENGLER

I FIRST MET OSWALD SPENGLER about seven years ago, when I was introduced to him by my philosophy professor. It was a strange meeting, for Professor Dray, who turned his field on its head with his first book,<sup>1</sup> confessed that he had little use for the man. Philosophy of history, he felt, could be a fruitful study in its analytical but not in its speculative branch; he pointed out the numerous questions that Spengler and others had begged or never seen and suggested that at least an attempt at a solution of some of them was in order. Since that time he has gone so far with these matters as to help Toynbee with his scheme for looking at history, showing that Toynbee had some of the right ideas but botched the execution.<sup>2</sup> But I cannot believe that he will ever think Spengler worth the trouble of reconstruction.

Since that time I have been making nearly annual attempts to get to know Spengler better. From time to time I am spurred on by the thought that there is a Spengler revival going on, or about to flower forth. There was an excellent monograph on him, which was thought worth a revised edition.<sup>3</sup> His essays were translated,<sup>4</sup> and his letters,<sup>5</sup> and I have read them, though they are turgid and even the editor says he was not much of a letter writer. But always an early frost comes on and nips the flower; or to change the image, the promised flood never gets past being a trickle, and a sporadic one at that. There isn't any important Spengler revival and there won't be. There will always be people to fight rearguard actions and support lost causes, and Spengler enthusiasts must be counted among them. Annually I spring at him in full earnest and hope to surprise myself in flight with nothing to do but go on and land as a Spenglerian. But just at take-off something puts me in mind of the man who enjoyed the movie *Cleopatra* because he likes long and boring pictures, and again I see him for what he is, a man whose work can only be treasured by people with an unaccountable liking for long and boring books.

But of course that is not all that he was in the 1920s and 1930s. Spengler was big and important; he was more than the author of what we now consider

cocktail books. (These have an enormous sale, a short life span, and probably a small true readership, for the truth about cocktail books is that a nimble thinker can get enough from the reviews to hold up his end of the conversation, which will become progressively less important anyway if it is a free cocktail party.) It is not just that the tempo of things is faster, that the long twenty-year Spengler fad before the war is the precise equivalent of a long two-year fad now. Rather it was a qualitatively different book. *The Decline of the West* was a book that generated intellectual and emotional excitement, a book people stayed up all night to read, one that brought about that lonely and exhilarating experience, that nearly religious experience, of suddenly seeing, and suddenly being in tune with what human life is about, and wanting more and more. Things clicked, the mind raced away on its own, and came back to see new meaning in what had been read and to drive itself on and on through discovery after discovery, and when sleep finally came the dreams were the same. It was a personal experience, but one that concerned everything—history, the world, culture, art—all dancing in a complex, almost celestial pattern whose precise details were yet to be worked out but which was nevertheless crystal clear at last.<sup>6</sup>

Some books cause this experience on an intellectual level, almost invariably called pure, by revealing logical truth. Bertrand Russell described his despair at being teased at cram school: "There was a footpath leading across fields to New Southgate, and I used to go there alone to watch the sunset and contemplate suicide. I did not, however, commit suicide, because I wished to know more of mathematics."<sup>7</sup> Mathematics was what he could stay up all night to study, and he described its later appeal for him in nearly Platonic terms: "Mathematics, rightly viewed, possesses not only truth but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture, without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, without the gorgeous trappings of painting or music, yet sublimely pure, and capable of a stern perfection such as only the greatest art can show."<sup>8</sup> This contrasts sharply with the appeal of Spengler's book. For all his lyricism, Russell could not be satisfied with anything less than a fully rational explanation, and would not proceed from point A to point B until it had been proved that it was a sound conclusion that he could, indeed, proceed to point B with the fullest confidence that the contingency was improbable that such a movement would subsequently prove to have been unjustified. Such proof was received with the greatest joy. The reader of Spengler could only regard such an attitude as somewhat constipated. His whole being rushed on with Spengler to point B with a mighty affirmation, the force of which could

sweep him dizzily on to point C and, depending upon the lateness of the hour, even beyond and to a vision of the whole texture of alphabetical points.

There are a number of reasons why Spengler's book was so exciting. It has often been pointed out that it was timely: volume one appeared in 1918 and volume two in 1922. Many things were clearly wrong with the world, and Spengler pointed out what and why. The topic was as vital as the state of one's own health. Certainly Spengler was dazzling with his ability to characterize symptoms of the malaise accurately and with feeling: "We go through all the exhibitions, the concerts, the theatres, and find only industrious cobblers and noisy fools, who delight to produce something for the market, something that will 'catch on' with a public for whom art and music and drama have long ceased to be spiritual necessities."<sup>9</sup> Some predictions were equally penetrating: ". . . in proportion as megalopolitan shallowness and triviality drive arts and sciences on to the bookstall and into the factory, the posthumous spirit of the Culture will confine itself more and more to very narrow circles; and . . . there, remote from advertisement, it will work in ideas and forms so abstruse that only a mere handful of superfine intelligences will be capable of attaching meanings to them" (I, 329). There is an elitist flavour in this which is very disagreeable in its implications, but perhaps readers who were not positively attracted by elitism were happy to take ideas where they could find them. For if anyone should qualify as a source of information it was bound to be Spengler: his erudition was fantastic, and if there was anything he did not mention, it was not because he did not know it, but because of the limitations imposed by the fact of writing a finite book. More than this, Spengler did startling things with his materials, juxtaposing ideas in ways no one had ever done before, marching into strange and dark areas and emerging victor over all the harpies that orthodox historians had banished there: who would have thought before that a book on world history could begin with a chapter on "The Meaning of Numbers"?

Literary style topped it off. "Nature", he said, "is to be handled scientifically, History poetically" (I, 96). Spengler as a poet excelled in the minds of some people. Terms like "the pure fact of consciousness" (I, 54) could be very exciting, and there is power in a sentence like this: "They (the great Cultures) appear suddenly, swell in splendid lines, flatten again and vanish, and the face of the waters is once more a sleeping waste" (I, 106). Style was one of his greatest strengths; but it also offended some readers from the first. It is clear enough that style frequently takes precedence over content, that it is used to dazzle and obfuscate and to avoid coming to terms with ideas in a

way that would make them useful public intellectual property. Only an utterly committed enthusiast could gobble up such a gem as "*Destiny is always young*" (I, 152) and imagine that he had taken in something that means anything at all. There are many passages in Spengler that seem significant and that read well but that I simply cannot understand. "As becoming is the foundation of the become, continuous living history that of fulfilled dead nature, the organic that of the mechanical, destiny that of causal law and the causally-settled, so too *direction is the origin of extension. The secret of Life accomplishing itself which is touched upon by the word Time forms the foundation of that which, as accomplished, is understood by (or rather indicated to an inner feeling in us by) the word Space*" (I, 172).

I should first confess that I invariably panic at italics and try so hard to grasp this singularly important passage that my focus is reduced to single words, with the result that I miss the point completely and have to go back. But still it seems too much. One gets the feeling that the worst problems of Spengler could have been averted if he had ever had the good fortune to get a kind composition teacher who sat down with him, smiled brightly, and said "Now let's see if there isn't a better way we could say this!" Probably his style will become increasingly offensive as time passes, for style is very much subject to fashion. But this can also be an advantage, for if Spengler infuriates with his endless italicizing, his extremes of fatuousness and sentimentality, we can afford to be tolerant by noticing that people used to write that way in those days, and don't any more. The quality of literary extravagance was a neutral one shared by preachers, philosophers, and charlatans alike in pre-Hitler days when the political consequences of mystical expression on social topics were not yet very apparent.<sup>10</sup>

The most important aspect of Spengler, related to his style and likewise the cause of violent polarization among his readers, is his historical method. It is the reason for the inadequacy of his outline of history, for his ugly reception in the scholarly world, for my inability to conquer him with the full armour and weaponry of scholarship (which I vainly imagine myself to possess), for the inability of anyone else ever to correct him or go beyond him as a practising Spenglerian. It is the final reason why his book is now so wretchedly unreadable. I remember having a reference to someone's saying that Spengler is "intuitionist through and through"; I have lost the reference, but it doesn't matter because the fact is so obvious that anyone might have said it.

On certain levels Spengler did some splendid things with his method.

On the grandest level, he revolted against any kind of linear view of history and substituted his own version of cyclical theories. As was customary with him, he gave the impression of having thought up this basic approach all by himself, and he was accordingly reproved by a somewhat sour R. G. Collingwood: "He cannot claim to have omitted them for lack of space; his book consists largely of repetitions, and of its 250,000 words it would have been easy to devote 250 to naming his predecessors in the field."<sup>11</sup> We shall put Collingwood aside momentarily while we consider, first, that the linear theories against which Spengler was rebelling were pre-World War I, usually based on some simplistic assumptions about science, and now apparently quite worthy of demolition; and further, that Spengler's battle is yet to be won, in the sense that we have yet either to manufacture some proper spectacles for viewing history or to agree that none are possible. That it is not self-evident that the history of the world is divisible into three periods, Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, perhaps needed to be said loudly at the time he said it.

The unit of history in Spengler's scheme is something called the Culture. The history of the world as a whole is the history of a group of Cultures, each of which has a distinctive way of thinking and feeling and acting. These differences are most easily apprehended in their different conceptions of space: the Classical Culture saw the world as a limited, self-contained body; the Western Culture sees it as infinitely wide, a profound, three-dimensional space; the Arabian world was a cavern; the Russian world a limitless plane. This is the fundamental thing which Spengler traces in an astonishing range in each Culture; space is the basis and link in his erudition, which spread over topics conveniently listed for us as "philosophical terminology and systems, jurisprudence, military strategy, architectural principles, monastic pedagogy, the evolution of a literary tradition and the individual artist's conception of it, burial customs and superstitions, interrelations in a pantheon, minor biographical facts, topography and geography of cities, dress and ceremonial, the premises and methodology of mathematics and the most advanced physical sciences."<sup>12</sup> Cultures occur in random distribution and for no discernable reason: they "grow with the same superb aimlessness as the flowers of the field" (I, 21). Each is a discrete entity; there are no connections between them except that they follow by nature a common life course and proceed through like periods of youth, maturity, and old age to their deaths. Thus Ancient and Modern has only internal meaning for any one Culture and not for the history of the whole world. Contemporaries are designated not by chronological position in the linear time of Western Culture but by reference

to the stage they represent in the internal development of their respective Cultures. To take an example from Spengler's charts, the English Puritans were "contemporaries" not of Ming-Ch'ing dynasty Chinese but of "Pythagorean society (from 540)" in Classical Culture, and of Mohammed in the Arabian, because of the fact that they shared "Puritanism. Rationalistic-mystic impoverishment of religion" with the Pythagoreans and Mohammed is more important than the fact that both they and the Ming-Ch'ing Chinese lived seventeen centuries after Christ.

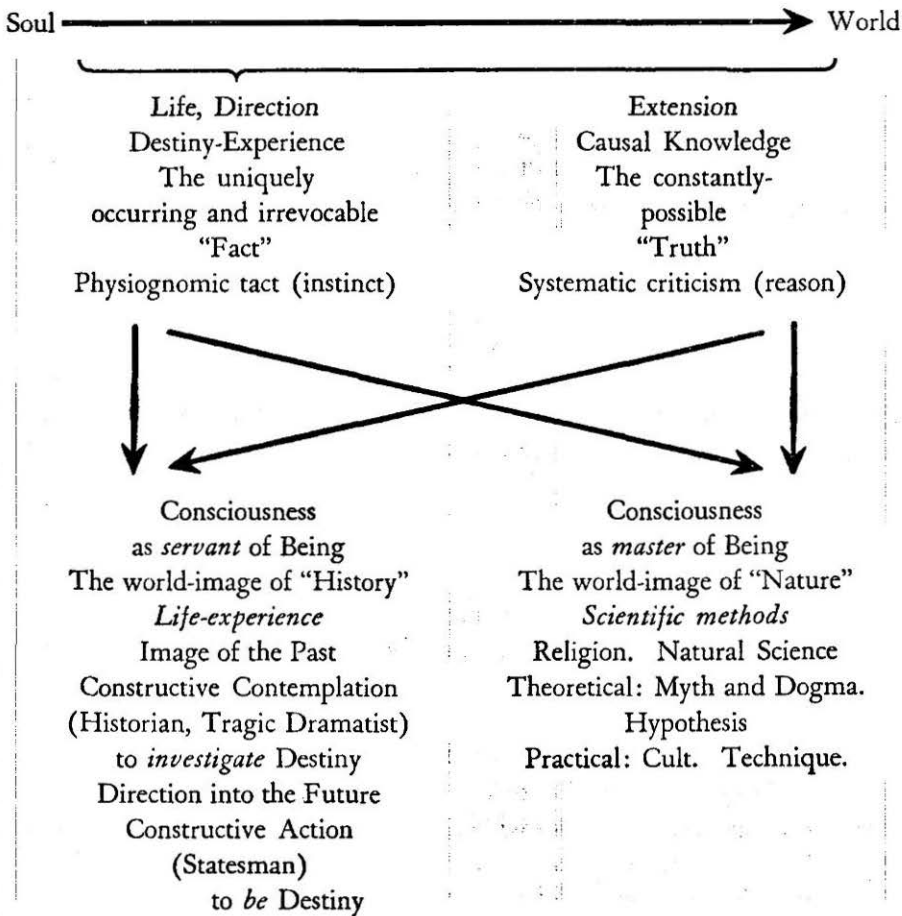
Criticism of his book came instantly from many quarters. It is easy to dispose of some of it. The most irrelevant is the charge of pessimism about our own civilization, which was made from the beginning and is still being made: "The great correction we must make of Spengler is to dispel his idea of our helplessness before fate."<sup>12</sup> Clearly the majority of such statements are emotional protests from the patient who does not wish to die. Spengler dealt with it early, in 1921, and as best he could, in an article called "Pessimism?"<sup>13</sup> Writing between the publication of his two volumes, he began by saying that volume one by itself was misleading and that the rounded view completed in the next would correct misconceptions, and then things would not look so bad. This of course was not true, as volume two was only more of volume one. He then pointed out some of his basic concepts, and said the same things about them as he had said in the book. People had been viewing history as linear; he had shown that history is the record of a group of Cultures, which all die. For his part he never could see how anyone could accept that view and imagine that our own Culture will not die. People were eager to show that something—the modern scientific revolution, development of advanced national political democracies—makes a difference, makes our own Culture quantitatively different. Spengler must have wondered if many intellectuals could actually read, for he had gone to a great deal of trouble to show that such things as are commonly brought up in support of an argument for survival are precisely aspects of the late stages of all Cultures, and all the others proceeded without fail to their extinction.

At a more advanced level comes factual criticism. Somebody has written a monograph on almost everything of which the general historian disposes in a single sentence or paragraph, so Spengler was bound to get a great many things wrong. But there is no end to the number of facts, and a correction project will not get us very far. More to the point is the observation that he is being extremely dogmatic and is ignoring facts that do not fit his schemes, forcing others to fit, or even deducing the facts of history from the direction

taken by history instead of the other way round. Thus he says that owing to its "*physiognomic abundance*" Western history demands "*contrapuntally strong accents—wars or big personalities—at the decisive points*", and it makes no difference whether or not they actually occur. "Withal, the Theme—the meaning of the epoch—would have been entirely unaltered by the facts assuming this or that shape. Goethe might—possibly—have died young, but *not* his 'idea'. Faust and Tasso would not have been written, but they would have 'been' in a deeply mysterious sense, even though they lacked the poet's elucidation" (I, 145). The outline being taken as correct, then the events must also be assumed to have happened in some sense according to morphological schedule. If Spengler is seen to be playing *that* game, then doubt is cast upon the whole structure (and for those who desire it, optimism becomes possible). If he did not make up his morphological schedules by finding out and thinking about what happened, then where did he get them? And why should we accept them? Factual criticism leads on to methodological criticism.

Spengler got his schemes from his soul. He reacted sharply against the developing ideas of scientific history and insisted that methods of science are completely inapplicable to history. He made a basic division between people and everything else; people are properly studied by intuition, everything else by science. "Man-knowing and Nature-knowing are in essence entirely incapable of being compared, but nevertheless the whole Nineteenth Century was at great pains to abolish the frontier between Nature and History in favour of the former. The more historically men tried to think, the more they forgot that in this domain men ought *not* to think" (I, 151-2). Nothing is offered by way of proof that this approach to history is valid, as that would have involved the very notions peculiar to science, which is absurd. He "proved" very little. His methodological justification took the form of occasional statements that "This idea (that Cultures are organisms) is one of those truths that have only to be expressed with full clarity to become indisputable" (I, 39) or of appeals past scholars to life itself: "The active person lives in the world of phenomena and with it. He does not require logical proofs, indeed he often cannot understand them. 'Physiognomic rhythm'—one of the terms that practically no one has been able to comprehend fully—gives him deeper insights into them than any method based on logical proof ever could."<sup>14</sup> *The Decline of the West* is Spengler's imagination run wild over history. This accounts for the chaotic organization of the work; for the endless repetition of ideas; each time announced as if they were being newly discovered; for all the *non sequiturs* and plain obscurities. I have spent some years trying to discover the significance

of the following diagram (I, 154), which is thrown in to elucidate the idea that history cannot be a science.



Someday someone may fully comprehend those terms, but no one but Spengler will ever know what the arrows are for.

This method explains the appalling vacuum we encounter when we attempt to examine specific concepts. Ask what he means by his basic unit, the Culture, or even how many there have been, and the answer, which must be put together by the reader himself, is so confused and vague as to be virtually empty. Similarly with causation in history: according to Spengler, Cultures develop by fulfilling internal teleologies; each has its Destiny. Destiny, however, is normally understood to be so general a term as to have practically



no explanatory force, and Spengler was not at any pains to make his meaning more specific. As far as he was concerned it was clear, and it was the spiritual rigidity of the questioner, not the term, that prevented him from understanding.

Unfortunately the issue of Spengler's method is confused by the fact that he did not remain true to it, but included charts to show the parallel developments in different Cultures. "By thus concretizing his theory, Spengler weakens it. . . . In devising his tables, Spengler seems to have forgotten that the strength of his perspective on history lies in its imaginative imprecision. . . . In trying to force his vision into a mechanical and totally inappropriate pattern, Spengler falls victim to that very systematic method he has ostensibly attacked."<sup>15</sup> Worse, Spengler conceived of his work as philosophy, not history, and said it was a "final" philosophy,<sup>16</sup> the only one possible at this stage of Western Culture. Since he considered his tabled facts to be on the same level of truth as the general theory, any attempt to recover his position under attack was hopeless. His only rejoinder could be the lonely cry that he was being misunderstood.

In another direction, R. G. Collingwood regarded the whole business of impressionism as mere garb cloaking an outright positivist, the precise opposite of the man of feeling, intuition, physiognomic tact. However, Collingwood was misled by the biological metaphor. Spengler repeated over and over that Cultures are organisms, and said "'Mankind' is a zoological expression, or an empty word" (I, 20). Collingwood apparently took this metaphor at face value: "This anti-historical and merely naturalistic view of history infects even Spengler's conception of the inner detail of each culture taken by itself; for the succession of phases within a culture, as he conceives it, is no more historical than the succession of the various phases in the life of an insect as egg, larva, pupa, and imago."<sup>17</sup> Collingwood ignored all the passages that elaborate the differences between human life and all other forms, from which it is at least possible to conclude that when Spengler used biological terms he must have had these distinctions in mind, so that the terms could be nothing but metaphors.<sup>18</sup> The reason why is found in Collingwood's next sentence, "Thus at every point the idea of historical process as a mental process, where the past is conserved in the present, is elaborately denied." Collingwood occupied a position with Spengler at the farthest reach from materialistic and positivistic philosophies of history, but he could not bear the company. Spengler was a distorting mirror in which he saw himself; while he was working on his ideas about the imaginative re-enactment of history, an imaginative work

appeared which he considered utterly ludicrous. The viciousness of his attack on Spengler shows how hard Collingwood was on himself.

It is time to come to terms with Spengler. A reasonable test of an historical method is to ask whether anyone else can use it. One writer has adopted "the Spengler Theory" completely for an article on Japanese history: "I may be presumptuous, but I am convinced that, if he had made the study, he would have come to much the same conclusion I have reached, using his methods."<sup>19</sup> This is not at all presumptuous, for it is precisely more of the same, complete with charts, italics, and the same dogmatic, brilliant, mystifying, and strangely banal passages, of which the following is typical: "Granted that the great Japanese castle walls, moats, bastions had a functional purpose. But did not the soaring white donjons and lavish ornamentation express something Napoleonic in the Japanese military soul of that age? Something that Beethoven, too, felt and expressed in the storm and crash of his music? Even as a ruin, Osaka-jo (Osaka Castle) has something 'Beethovenesque' about it. It is *big*."<sup>19</sup> If that is not quite what we are looking for, we should see if anyone has been able to adapt and develop Spengler's methods. This is being done on the theoretical level for Collingwood, and the results so far are altogether pleasing and promising.<sup>20</sup> No one, however, has been able to take Spengler seriously on a similar theoretical level. On the practical level, no one has been able to write widely acceptable history as a conscious Spenglerian, however advanced. Those who try to emulate him share his virtues and faults in about the same proportion as he did, and in his discussion of them Professor Hughes makes it clear that he thinks they move to the side of virtue in proportion as they abandon his principles.<sup>21</sup>

Spengler's method for history remains a personal vision. That, surely, is all that we should require of him. Because his vision does not recognize any discipline, his method and many of his conclusions are of no value whatever, but we can follow him where he goes and learn what we can. Recent thinking about history has been more or less based upon an assumption that historical writing should in some way be explanatory, but there is no reason not to make room for other kinds of writing to be accepted on their own terms, *once the basic flaws have been understood, simply in order to find out some things we never knew before.* Besides, he has stimulated other writers who have rubbed against him. The case of Collingwood has already been pointed out. Another obvious one is Toynbee. When he first read Spengler he felt that he had seen a great light, that the whole of what he had in mind to do had been "disposed of by Spengler before even the questions, not to speak of the answers,

had fully taken shape."<sup>22</sup> But further reflection upon some basic identifications and explanations spurred him to produce better ones, and the search took him through all those volumes. Norman O. Brown drew upon Spengler, among others, for his fruitful work on money in *Life Against Death*. Perhaps there will be more. In particular the death theme is so striking in *The Decline of the West* that it is surprising that no one has taken it up already, or the more general question of Spengler's irrationalism with all its ramifications, including the glorification of violence, in relation to his time and ours.

All that I have said should make it clear that I am not suggesting at all that we should embrace Spengler uncritically. If only for our own protection we should exempt nothing from the tests of reason. I am only saying that academic criticism has already done as much as it can in dealing with Spengler; it can not amend, improve, develop, restructure, or even use his method for history. But some can benefit from contact with Spengler, and that is as much as we should demand. If it seems that I am making a case for poor books, then I shall have to accept that criticism, with the proviso that they be much-acclaimed poor books that run through all sorts of editions. If reading Spengler brings benefit, read him; if it doesn't, don't. For the time being, that is how I propose to get along with Spengler.

#### NOTES

1. William Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford, 1957).
2. "Toynbee's Search for Historical Laws", *History and Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1960) pp. 32-54.
3. H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler, A Critical Estimate* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, rev. ed., 1962).
4. Donald O. White, trans., *Oswald Spengler, Selected Essays* (Chicago: Gateway Edition, 1967).
5. Arthur Helps, trans. and ed., *Spengler Letters, 1913-1936* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966).
6. This experience is unique to reading. With radio and television, one cannot control the input, cannot repeat or extend the programme, or stop it at any point for reflection, or avoid the commercial messages. Staying up all night with television cannot even be as serious an activity for a healthy person as assembling a jigsaw puzzle. Those who do not fall asleep are reduced to a dishevelled frustrated stupidity, with numbness of the buttocks, itchiness of the scalp and eyelids, and an oily skin.
7. *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 45.

8. "The Study of Mathematics", in *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Longmans, Green, 1918), p. 60.
9. *The Decline of the West*, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson (London: George Allen and Unwin, one volume edition, 1932), I, 293. Subsequent references are given, in parentheses, in the text.
10. It is a question how much Spengler was influenced by German philosophical and literary traditions, but he confirms the popular view that German productions were mostly heavy-handed.
11. "Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles", *Antiquity*, vol. 1 (1927), p. 314.
12. Albert Cook, "The Merit of Spengler", *The Centennial Review of Arts and Science* (vol. 7, 1963), p. 311, 314.
13. In White, *Selected Essays*, pp. 133-154.
14. "Pessimism?", p. 134.
15. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 74.
16. *Spengler Letters*, p. 76.
17. *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1956), p. 182.
18. J. Huizinga recognized that Spengler was trying to use metaphorical language, but selected Spengler as the prime example of the easy way in which figures of speech turn into philosophical and scientific terms. However, Huizinga criticized the result not as positivism but as anthropomorphism: "while he tyrannically assigned his cultures to their places, he gave them human form, attributed to them a biological life-cycle, and in this way did violence to history." "Historical Conceptualization", in Fritz Stern, editor, *The Varieties of History* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 295.
19. John Randolph, "The Senior Partner", *Japan Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Jan.-March, 1964), p. 94-5. The gist of the title is that, contrary to appearances, Japan is senior to the West because it is about 250 years ahead on the morphological schedule.
20. Alan Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford, 1962), chapter 9, finds Collingwood contradictory; further solutions are suggested in Louis O. Mink, "Collingwood's Dialectic of History", *History and Theory*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1968), pp. 3-37, which contains the promise of a book.
21. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, chapter 9 and appendix II.
22. "My View of History", in *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford, 1948), p. 9.