

# THE MENTAL TRAVELLER

A REVIEW ARTICLE\*

By K. M. HAMILTON

THESE four volumes complete the comprehensive survey of civilizations begun by Professor Toynbee over thirty years ago. The scale of the work has made the adjective *monumental* an inevitable one to apply to it. Now that it stands entire, this monument of erudition, industry and artistry compels our admiration and respect. Yet with admiration is mingled considerable bewilderment and more than a few misgivings. It cannot be said that the latest additions to the ten thick volumes which make up *A Study of History* have made all clear, but they shed considerable light upon their author's methods and motives and help us to gain a perspective in which the whole work is seen more intelligibly.

The main outlines of the *Study* were laid down in the initial plan of the book and have not been altered radically since, though there have been some changes of emphasis and re-valuations over the years. According to Dr. Toynbee the story of man on earth can be divided into two parts: the record of primitive societies and the record of cultured societies or civilizations. History proper is concerned with the latter. Civilized societies are to be taken (at least provisionally) as distinct units of study which can be examined both by themselves in their successive phases of growth and decay, and also comparatively in their inter-relations. From an empirical observation of these units—which number thirty all told, and either twenty-one or twenty-three when imperfect specimens have been removed—certain regular features emerge. Each civilization is brought about by individuals or minorities who succeed in drawing their society after them in a creative response to a challenge presented by environment. Pride in achievement, however, leads to 'the nemesis of creativity'; and this moral failure leads to the collapse of society in a rhythm of 'rout-and-rally'. Disintegration is set in motion by schism in the body social. The place of the 'creative minority' is taken by a 'dominant minority' over against an 'internal proletariat' and an 'external proletariat'. The dominant minority founds a 'universal State' in an effort to put an end to the engulfing 'Time of Troubles'. The internal proletariat brings to birth a 'universal Church'. And the external

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\*A STUDY OF HISTORY by Arnold J. Toynbee. Volumes VII, VIII, IX, X. Issued under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Oxford University Press, Toronto. \$32.00 per set

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proletariat inaugurates a barbarian 'heroic age', ultimately destroying the universal State. Out of the internal proletariat's universal Church comes the impulse which leads to a new civilization of a 'third generation'.

The first six volumes carried the narrative of the growth and decay of civilizations down to the period of disintegration in the Time of Troubles. The last four take up the tale of universal States, universal Churches and of the barbarian heroic ages. The most considerable revision of Dr. Toynbee's scheme occurs in reviewing the place of the Churches in civilization. He now finds that Churches are not to be valued simply because they serve as *chrysalides* for new civilizations, but as ends in themselves. Civilizations of the third stage fall out of the picture. After dealing with contacts between civilizations in Space and Time, Dr. Toynbee then proceeds to estimate the prospects of Western civilization to-day in the light of his survey and to discuss the issue of Law and Freedom in history and also the Inspirations of Historians.

The *Study* claims to be, first and foremost, an empirical investigation. The obvious question which immediately arises thus is: does the evidence presented in the ten volumes demonstrate that there is a *prima facie* case for the thesis as given? And the plain answer is, *No*. So much must be clear even to the reader who, like the present reviewer, is not himself an historian. For Dr. Toynbee's method of exposition is at once so diffuse and so impressionistic that no single point is ever hammered home with precision. A multitude of acute historical judgments are to be found here, with a host of wise reflections upon everyday life and upon spiritual values—and with an inexhaustible flow of poetic imagery and literary references. But we never learn (what we are told is the proper function of history to teach us) how *this* comes of *that*.

To take a trivial but typical example of Dr. Toynbee's method, he informs us that watching a Japanese puppet show at Osaka in November 1929, where the operators remained in full view of the audience and yet did not draw the spectators' attention away from the puppets, taught him to make unobtrusive insertions in his text by turning these into *Latin*, putting brackets round them and printing them in italics. The connection between this no doubt useful practice and Osaka, November 1929, can in this instance be taken for granted. We must accept the writer's word that some subjective process of the mind opened up to him a way of duplicating one technique of artistry in a

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vastly different medium, though we are not told whether the idea of italicized Latin within brackets was immediately conjured up as the puppeteers performed or came later through reflection—a rather important point. But what we can be perfectly sure about is that a technique to be used on the printed page did not come about simply as a result of seeing a puppet show; and although the psychological effect of this experience in the Orient impressed itself on our author, it is more than likely that he has much over-estimated its real worth. The Western education which made him familiar with the conventions current in modern printing, and alert to the possibilities of revising and developing them, must have been a far more potent factor in producing the idea of those brackets than the exotic spectacle to which he has attributed the genesis of his idea.

Continually in the *Study* we are confronted by historical 'explanations' as unsatisfactory as this one from personal history and suffering from the same basic defects: namely, of signally failing to prove that *this* in fact came out of *that*; and of preferring a piquant and romantic hypothesis, even if tenuous, to a less colourful alternative. One outstanding instance is Dr. Toynbee's contention that Russia's outlook has been moulded by a consciousness of its destiny as 'the Third Rome'. When two eminent scholars deny that in fact Russia had any such consciousness, Dr. Toynbee simply reiterates his belief and states that the character he ascribes to this Russian consciousness is borne out by the character of Jewish messianism. In other words, in place of evidence about what Russians believed comes the further assumption that Russian belief must have been identical with Jewish belief, although any connection between Russia and Jewry could only be maintained *via* the still further assumption that, in claiming to be a third Rome, Russia was carrying on messianic beliefs inherited from Judaism by Christianity and that those beliefs were still essentially unmodified. Such series of assumptions are commonplaces in the *Study*, which compasses sea and land to find 'parallels' to illustrate the working out of 'laws' of history where the similarities appealed to are by no means evident, much less proven.

Thus, while the historian may join issue with Dr. Toynbee on the matter of his forcing specific historic facts to fit his theories against the available evidence, the common reader, even though he lacks the specialist's knowledge, can hardly overlook the arbitrary way in which Dr. Toynbee lays down his conclusions. Nor can he fail to notice the contrast between the con-

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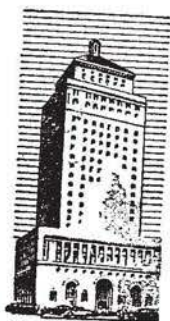
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fidet tone of these conclusions, which involve making judgments upon the entire destiny of the human race and the worth of all humanity has achieved, and the judge's reluctance to commit himself when it comes to deciding exactly what stage our present civilization has reached in its journey towards disintegration. If an empirical method is being followed, surely the evidence available in this case must be both more abundant and more conclusive than in any other. In short, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that in the *Study* the theories are not fashioned by facts, but that facts have to conform to the theories. As R. G. Collingwood wrote in *The Idea of History* after seeing the first three volumes, 'the whole scheme is really a scheme of pigeon-holes elaborately arranged and labelled, into which ready-made historical facts can be put'. Collingwood added the warning: 'This act, become habitual, leads to an obsession'.

To a great extent, the conquest of fact by theory in the *Study* appears to have been brought about by an undue reliance upon metaphors. Again, we can take one example out of many. Having decided that Renaissances are the raising of ghosts, Dr. Toynbee insists that the 'consequences of necromancy' are always, as in traditional magic lore, loss of vitality in the living. Thus the whole of European art from Giotto is dismissed as 'sterilized'. An incredible judgment, one might think, but apparently preferable to rejecting the picture of blood being poured out to revivify a corpse.

Dr. Toynbee's picturesque metaphors are not always easy to reconcile. According to the *Study*, the children of Western civilization should realize that their civilization is a 'vain repetition'—'an almost meaningless repetition of something that the Hellenes had done before them, and done extremely well'—'the monotonous rise of yet another secular civilization'. If we try to bring this metaphor of Western culture as a 'repetition' into relation with the 'necromancy' metaphor we must conclude that, even had not Western artists tried to raise the ghost of a dead Greek art, they would nevertheless have been doomed to an uncreative existence by being part and parcel of an 'outmoded' third-generation civilization. It would thus seem doubly certain that Western culture as a whole, being a mere echo with no meaning of its own (and any vitality that it might have had being rendered sterile) could achieve nothing notable in its monotonous progress towards final dissolution. On the contrary, we learn that Western civilization has achieved notable 'spiritual victories'. In abolishing Slavery it has conquered one



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of the 'twin cancers of Civilization ever since this species of society had just emerged', and it might yet succeed in conquering the disease of War. Such a contrast in valuations is even harder to understand than conflicting statements, as when, after learning that 'suicide' and not 'murder' is invariably the 'coroner's verdict' upon deceased civilizations, we are told that Western civilization has 'assassinated' three others.

Collingwood noted that the *Study* treated history as 'something biological and best understood on biological analogies'. Now it is organisms which Spengler had adopted. The leading analogies he himself emphasizes are ones describing a moral struggle: 'challenge and response', 'rout and rally', 'resting on one's oars'. Yet it is also true that these metaphors describe equally well a Darwinian struggle for existence. *Survival* has simply been lent a moral tone by being renamed *creative endeavour*; and, when one who has come out on top in the struggle fails to preserve his position against rivals, this is labelled the *nemesis* of *hubris*. If Dr. Toynbee had really abandoned thinking of civilization as biological organisms he would hardly talk of them as *growing* or *committing suicide*. For him Life is Action, and the primary meaning of action is Ajax and Hector in mortal combat. Imagery of warfare is so prominent in the *Study* that even when the author is considering the nature of the Human Intellect he turns it into a fight with an opponent who is told that 'he had better make up his mind now to capitulate' if he wants to be 'given quarter'. The free use of capital letters to distinguish abstract terms which are regarded as being psychic powers indicates the same trend of thought; for we are told that these powers, though non-personal, work for weal and woe in human history. This can only mean that they are thought of as possessing the same kind of will-to-power as living organisms which strive to perpetuate themselves.

No wonder then, when he sees in history nothing but an unending battle, Dr. Toynbee has concluded, like Gibbon, that history is a record of the crimes and follies of mankind. But, unlike Gibbon, he has not been content to rest in an attitude of detachment. He has determined to wrestle with what he calls 'the cruel riddle'—all the more so because of the contemporary threat to the continuance of biological life on earth. He looks at the struggle of successive civilizations to consolidate their tenure of power and feels the vanity of it all. Better abandon the attempt to build earthly kingdoms and concentrate on a Kingdom not of this world, as religion teaches men to do.

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This idea of religion as an alternative to the pursuit of power, which was only tentatively introduced before, is the most spectacular development in the new volumes. The sceptically-minded will no doubt raise the cry, *Obscurantism*, while some religiously-minded persons will rejoice that a learned historian has at last seen the light. Most Christians, on the other hand, will be constrained to point out not only (as Mr. Martin Wight has been granted space to do in the text of the *Study*) that Dr. Toynbee's views are not those of Christianity, but also that the methods he uses to establish the place of religion in human knowledge are very questionable. A scholar conducting an empirical enquiry may very properly suggest that such a study needs to be supplemented by a religious view of the universe. He cannot with any consistency introduce theological categories alongside his empirical ones, as though they had an identical *kind* of validity. When Dr. Toynbee argues, with Augustine, that earthly life is painful and transitory and at best can serve to lead men to a better world, he takes his stand upon the ground of faith. But, when he argues that the evidence of history points to a law of God granting freedom to man to co-operate with Him on a cosmic plane, he is dictating to historians and theologians alike from premisses which neither are likely to find convincing. And when he describes history as a vision of God revealing Himself in action, supporting his case by quoting, 'No man hath seen God at any time', the truncated Johannine text he has pressed into service bears witness against him, and its suppressed ending actually refutes him.

*Peregrinus* is Dr. Toynbee's own choice of name for himself. But this pilgrim is one who, like the Mental Traveller in Blake's poem with that title, is much more than a 'cold Earth wanderer'. Of all journeyings, those in the realm of the spirit are the most exacting, perilous and fateful. The human spirit which has journeyed from the mental climate of one generation to that of another may easily find itself a stranger in a foreign land where it can never be at home although, equally, its former home has become foreign to it. Dr. Toynbee has passed from the world of late Victorian certainties, where it had been intellectually fashionable to discount religion and to put implicit faith in Western progress, into our modern world of anxious self-questionings. He has turned against the Victorian creeds of naturalism, automatic progress and the finality of Western liberal culture. And yet, in spite of a root-and-branch repudiation of these articles of belief, they have all reappeared again in his thinking



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in only a slightly disguised form. Nature cannot be successfully thrown out with a pitch-fork—nor can second nature.

When the *Study* is taken, not as an empirical investigation into human history but as the testimony of a mental traveller, then discordant and puzzling elements in it begin to make sense. The author has projected onto the screen of universal history his inner questionings, hoping to find in this manner satisfaction for his head and his heart. That is why these last volumes are of particular interest. Here the man himself, rather than the system behind which he has hidden himself (if only very transparently), comes fully into view. We discover that it was the crisis of 1914 which supplied the motive for investigating history's twenty civilizations. If the present were indeed a repetition of the past, a study of the past could show conclusively why an apparently secure Western culture had been plunged into disaster, and could map out, equally conclusively, its future prospects. The assumption here was that naturalism ruled in history. Historians who denied this certainty of diagnosis (and so of prediction) must be labelled *antinomians* and condemned as noxious heretics. Yet, though Western naturalism could bring the external world under the rule of law, it reduced the internal world to meaninglessness. The Human Intellect could see that the wheels of history turned in obedience to cosmic order. The Human Heart could not take comfort in the thought that they were getting anywhere. From the promptings of his Heart the mental traveller made a discovery: *religion meant progress*. Civilizations must lose their collective lives, but men can find their individual souls. Therefore, because Western civilization had rejected religion by the mouth of such unholy prophets as Gibbon and Sir James Fraser, Western civilization must be not only meaningless but also the worst of all possible civilizations.

Was Western civilization then inexorably doomed by the iron laws of naturalistic history? The antinomian heretics in their blindness had denied the rule of law in human affairs; they could give neither guidance nor comfort. But, since religion led to progress, if only the laws of God could be known we might hope again for the West which, since it was still alive, had presumably not been already sentenced to death by history. Christianity claimed to some insight into the ways of God, but unfortunately Christianity was not easy to believe in by one brought up under Western naturalism. Only recently, Western naturalistic science had proved that the 'higher' religions now in

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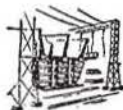
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existence had been created to satisfy particular psychological needs, and so were clearly not true, at least in their present form. Then the mental traveller remembered the poets. There was Aeschylus's dictum that *suffering teaches*. This must surely be a dependable spirit law, when interpreted in the spirit of Tennyson's 'truth':

That men may rise on stepping stones  
Of their dead selves to higher things.

Then there was Browning, who had supplied him with the telling metaphor of *challenge and response*, and who had spoken about the need for our reach to exceed our grasp. If the human race will only make its moral endeavour strenuous enough, seek high enough goals, believe that 'the best is yet to be' and that God's chariot of religion is rising all the time, there may yet be a wonderful future for the whole world under the leadership of the West, united by a psychologically-satisfying World religion ('Our little systems have their day . . .').

After claiming to be a convert to Augustinianism through the impact of twentieth-century disillusionment upon nineteenth-century optimism, Dr. Toynbee has thrown in his lot with Augustine's arch-enemy Pelagius; and his Pelagianism takes the typically nineteenth-century form of imagining that religion exists primarily to tell us that we can be co-operators with God in building the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The mental traveller has fallen back upon the resources of the home from which he has journeyed and has proclaimed again in this uncomfortable and discomforted age the Gospel according to Tennyson and Browning. As one man's testimony as to the beliefs which he considers adequate to give history meaning, *A Study in History* is full of interest, especially since it is built upon pre-suppositions which are quite uncommon to-day. It will stimulate historians, students of religion, and all who are concerned with 'the prospects of the Western civilization'. But it is unlikely to provide any satisfactory answer to the serious enquirer in any of these fields, or to be an enduring monument in the record of man's attempt to wrestle with the mystery of his life on earth.