

Spengler, His Self & I – De la Soul

By *Christophe Lucchese*

Translated from the French by *Steven Corcoran*

When he speaks of the “**proliferation of border-bodies**,” Achille Mbembe is thinking less of the pandemic than of the “**postcolonial condition**,” the movement of withdrawal, of a nationalist return (of the repressed) at work in the former colonial powers. This is what he calls the “politics of enmity,” a politics of “fear of contact” with the nocturnal part of former empires. Can we speak of a generalised “fear of contact” in our age of pandemic and “social distancing”? There is something paradoxical about this “social distancing,” literally this “fear of coming into contact (with others/foreign bodies),” which is supposed to combat the spread of a virus. It is a *pharmakon*: it abolishes proximity – the condition of all sociability – in order to preserve society as a collective. Limiting the social as much as possible in order to preserve it... Body-barrier and body-boundary – the individual is no more than a monad adrift, sensing the echo from the very depths of the Soul: “It’s just Me, Myself and I.”

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/P8-9mY-JACM>

But to this day I can speak neither of friends nor of experiences nor of facts nor of joys nor of sorrows, only of Me, Me, Me, of the Me encapsulated inside, like a cork, with the bitter awareness of being locked up, suffering without ever finding an external way out.

The pandemic, this “all-powerful governor,” is an “accelerator of universal history” that brings global crises to an unprecedented level of intensity. I quote Lenin (1870-1924) on purpose, not so much to claim a Marxism(-Leninism) that has since fizzled out, but to draw a parallel with one of his contemporaries, a kind of epistemic negative counterpart, namely Oswald Spengler (1880-1936). The former was heir to a social critique whose source resides in the Marxist critique of the capitalist relations of production; the latter, a supporter of *Kulturkritik*, was a fervent nationalist and Prussian thru and thru, who wrote his *Decline of the West* as a contribution to the war effort, as a theoretical translation of the “ideas of 1914.” The first title in a long series of declinist books, the first “German or Western Suicide” book in the series.

Today, on the greatest day in world history that has occurred in my lifetime and that resonates so powerfully with the idea I was born to live for, on 1 August 1914, I am alone in my home. No one is thinking of me.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/z77JFw2D6f8>

I don't have much to do with Spengler. Before 2016, I had only a vague idea of this

“thinker” – famous overnight for a book – whom everyone knows without ever having read him. This changed when, in 2016, a publisher suggested that I re-translate *Man and Technics*. The publisher in question is interested in the German “Conservative Revolution.” I was more interested in the Spartakist revolution. I have just translated Klaus Theweleit's *Fantasmagorias*, and this turbulent period fascinates me. The *Freikorps*, the ultranationalist militia that crushed the socialist uprisings in post-war Germany and later declared themselves to be “the first soldiers of the Third Reich,” have a mental universe very close to Spengler's, even if it is more boorish and more oriented towards action, towards “doing,” like the Jünger Brothers or Ernst von Salomon, among others.

My God, how different my life could have been, how much more beautiful if the Great War had taken me (...).

Without being on the same political side as the editor, he and I debated and even found, to my great astonishment, points of convergence, not so much on the diagnosis of the present times as on the starting observation: modernity. The translation of *Man and Technics*, a pamphlet written in 1931, almost ten years after the second volume of *The Decline of the West*, seemed to me to be an opportunity to plunge into this vitalist thought that smacks of irrationalism, to familiarise myself with it, to get to know it first hand, like Klaus Theweleit with his *Freikorps*. My bearings were not shaken up. Spengler proceeds by antitheses: life is opposed to death, *Seele* (“soul”) to *Geist* (“spirit”); the *great man* to the *masses*; *community* to *society*; *Kultur* to *Zivilisation*; the *organic* to the *mechanical*. There is thus nothing new under the setting sun here.... Basically, a *Seele* inhabits a *Kultur*, which develops and grows before beginning its decline as *Zivilisation*. The warm “soul” full of life turns into a cold, calculating “mind.” All this occurs in cycles of 1000 years. Western *Kultur*, also called Promethean or Faustian culture, is distinguished by its science and technology.

It reached its peak in the 19th century and began its decline as a *Zivilisation*, eaten away at by disenchanting rationalism, at the turn of the 20th. Right on cue for Spengler.

I was never young, never happy. I have always wished and hesitated until it was too late, never dared to do and regretted everything.

Constantly asserting his “heroic realism,” Spengler deemed nonetheless that we should not throw in the towel, let alone give up our arms, those daughters of the technological superiority of Faustian culture. This is the sense of Spengler's tragic bravado: “We are born in 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. To hold on like that Roman soldier whose bones were found in front of a door in Pompeii, who died because they forgot to relieve him when Vesuvius erupted. That is greatness; that is to have race. This honourable end is the one thing that cannot be taken from Man.” Thus ends *Man and Technics*.

Even as a child I thought I would become a kind of messiah. To found a new religion of the sun, a new earthly empire, a magical country, a new Germany, a new world view – this was the content of 9/10 of my dreams.

My translation is distinguished by the afterword of a Spengler specialist, Gilbert Merlio,

who does not indulge Spengler or show him any questionable fascination. The publisher then asked me to translate his next book: *The Hour of Decision*. Originally published in December 1933, this work is an update of a lecture given to the Patriotic Society of Hamburg in 1930. But this time, with full knowledge of the facts, as it were, I felt *uneasy*. What in the previous book was still hidden behind the camouflage of philosophical considerations is now simply blurted out. Originally written before the NSDAP came to power, the lecture on which this book is based was titled *Germany in Peril*. From the nation in peril, we proceed to *decisions*. The introduction gives the “measure”: “No one can have looked forward to the national revolution of this year with greater longing than myself.” [...] “the national revolution of 1933 was a mighty phenomenon and will remain such in the eyes of the future by reason of the elemental, super-personal force with which it came and the spiritual discipline with which it was carried through.”

When I look at my life, there is one feeling that has dominated everything, everything: fear of the future, fear of my loved ones, fear of men, of sleep, of the administration, of storms, of war, fear, fear. I never had the courage to show it to others. They wouldn't have understood me. I don't think anyone has lived in such horrible isolation [...]. And so I began to lie, because I was afraid of myself, because I didn't want to show what I felt, because I didn't dare to talk about my inner self.

I turned down the translation. This dilemma, abstract until you are confronted with it, of whether you can translate a text that goes against your personal opinions, is something you hope never to have to decide upon, because the choice between earning a crust and sticking to your morals is anything but easy given the precariousness of your condition as a translator. But it was no longer a dilemma at this point. It doesn't take any “heroic realism” or lucidity to understand that by translating such a text, one was giving a short shrift to the “**little beast that rises, that rises.**”¹ Contributing to the revival of a nationalist is not for me. First I had to overcome my apprehensions to get closer to Spengler. Now I chose to distance myself from him.

But no matter how much one distances oneself, the things one fears eventually return. Between me and Spengler, they emerged thanks to his notes recorded *eis he'auton*, “to one's self.” In posthumous fragments first published in Germany in 2007 under the title *Ich beneide jeden, der lebt* (“I envy everyone who lives”) – a kind of anti-*Ecce Homo* devoid of the slightest irony – I discovered a pitiful Spengler, a world away from the “man of facts,” the “connoisseur of history,” and the “animal of prey” he dreamed of incarnating. Riddled with all sorts of anxieties (about leaving his house, meeting people, seeing women), this thinker, who had wanted to founder in beauty, to be a Roman soldier who does not even abandon his post even when the volcano is roaring behind, to be an adviser to the great “statesmen” and the new *Caesars*; this “thinker” therefore sought to give a false appearance to his inner misery, which, whatever else he did, he did not seek to interpret, and that he had sealed, unwilling to change it, under a thick layer of misplaced pride and fantasies of regained greatness. A philosophy of inner misery. If these ‘memoirs’ – aborted like so many of his projects – did not make him any more relatable to me, they did make him human, quite human, of the sort of humanity ready to come into contact with its own fears. This would bode a good start.

*Soy un perdedor
I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me?*

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/YgSPaXgAdzE>

Endnoten

- 1 Jean-Marie Le Pen explicitly refers to Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* for a reason that may escape German speakers. Indeed, this famous quote from the epilogue of Brecht's play says in German: "Der Schoß ist fruchtbar noch, aus dem *das* kroch!" (1941). I emphasise the '*das*' ('that'), because in the French translation (1950), Armand Jacob translates it as: "Le ventre est encore fécond d'où surgi *la bête immonde* !" From *das* to *bête immonde* there is a whole interpretative arc that the English translator, Hoffman Reynolds, was the first to make, already in 1941: "The belly is still fertile from which the *foul beast* sprang!" Again, the emphasis is mine. In fact, this interpretation makes sense and is not really ambiguous, especially for an author like Brecht and a play like this. In this light, Le Pen's procedure of inverting the meaning appears particularly perverse: he does this by referring BOTH to Brecht (by "turning the stigma around" to the point of voluntarily identifying himself with the "*das*", the "foul beast"), AND by taking up a well-known French nursery rhyme – *la petite bête qui monte qui monte* (the little beast that rises, that rises), which is as childish and innocent as it gets. Le Pen did it again recently by publishing a promotional video for the publication of his memoirs in which he is shown getting into a lift with the imperial musical theme of Star Wars in the background: Jean-Marie Le Pen, stirring in one and the same pot a nursery rhyme, Arturo Ui and Darth Vader, could rightly be included alongside Bolsonaro, Trump, BoJo, Salvini, in the tyranny of buffoons that Christian Salmon describes.



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Christophe Lucchese. Italian by birth, German at heart and Alsatian by adoption. As a repentant student of philosophy, he began translating through the writings of Klaus Theweleit (*Männerphantasien*, *Absolute(Iy) Sigmund Freud*, *Das Lachen der Täter*) and Georg Weerth (*Leben und Taten des berühmten Ritters Schnapphansky*). He has also tackled Albrecht Koschorke, Horst Bredekamp, Byung-Chul Han, Rosa Luxemburg and Vilém Flusser. When not translating, he ventures to unearth unjustly forgotten literary

treasures. He harbours illusions of one day translating *Zettel's Traum* by Arno Schmidt.

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