Chapter Four

The Unhappy Endings of Morphology
Oswald Spengler’s Demonic History

Kyklisches so gut wie eschatologisches Denken kann sich der großen Parallele bedienen. [Cyclical as well as eschatological thought can make use of grand parallels.]


The Problem of “Realization-Recoil”

The Austrian novelist Heimito von Doderer used the term “Erfüllungs-Rückstoß”—“the recoil of fulfillment”—to refer to a wide range of phenomena associated with the idea of realization in its various senses. The term appears in Doderer’s diary as a part of the important 1933 “thematic” list (discussed in chapter 7), which conceives it as a political allegory, specifically as a mode of reflecting on new problems that inevitably arise when an idea or plan is realized. The “realization” in question in 1933 was the end of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi rise to power in Germany. Doderer, an Austrian, had been a supporter of the Austrian National Socialist movement since before 1933. This context is clear in his diary, according to which Erfüllungs-Rückstoß defines the situation of artists in the new political landscape: “The condition in which a spiritual worker [ein spiritueller Arbeiter] now finds himself, in the first period after the birth of the new Reich, stands under the psychological law of Erfüllungs-Rückstoß” (Tagebücher 1920–1939, 1:651, my translation).¹

Doderer’s support of Nazism and his reactionary politics at this time pose questions that may never be completely answerable.² Biographical issues aside, however, the problem of realization and fulfillment undoubtedly reflects a more general experience. Georg Lukács, for example, may have...
confronted similar uncertainties following the Russian Revolution of 1917. A more contemporary example of such a “recoil” scenario is the post-1989 fall of communism, which led to speculation about “the end of history,” while the citizens of affected nations did not experience an immediate realization of all of their hopes and dreams. On the political stage, the “recoil” of a “realization” includes renewed conflict, disappointment, and despair (which may undermine the proclaimed “realization”). Doderer’s case is trivial, one might say, because he mostly seems to understand the problem with respect to his own chances as a writer. Even this triviality, however, reveals the conception’s wide applicability to countless large and small events; and this in turn makes it viable as a literary theme capable of surviving Doderer’s involvement with fascism.

The psychological law of “fulfillment recoil” is psychological because it applies to everyone differently; it would state that once a particular sweeping change has taken effect—such as a military victory or “the birth of an empire” or the election of a certain president—this does not mean that every individual hope (or fear) is automatically realized. To the contrary, Erfüllungs-Rückstoß is only the first wave of future backlash, the first moment of disillusionment. Thus the Nazis’ rise to power was ironically inauspicious for Doderer, because his pro-Nazi epic The Demons (begun around 1930) was supposed to end with a vision of the “new empire.” History got there first, realizing his hopes before he could programatically espouse them in writing. This odd case of timing provided the basis for his postwar literary success: if he had actually completed and published a pro-Nazi novel (before or after the Anschluss), it would have been exceedingly difficult for him to convincingly backtrack his ideological commitments in time to save his reputation.

“Fulfillment recoil” is not one theme among others—for Doderer or in general. It recurs throughout his work as a figure of the demonic, starting with early texts predating his turn toward fascist politics. This idea—of “being taken aback by an unexpected realization”—is most compactly and systematically articulated in Doderer’s diary (May 5, 1933) in a “microscopic comparison”:

It is this Erfüllungs-Rückstoß which still always takes one’s breath away [den Atem versetzt]. Allow me a small, even microscopic comparison [Vergleich]. If I am thinking of someone as I walk down the street, and then he is suddenly and “accidentally” [’zufällig’] standing in front of me in the flesh: this means that something has jumped from the inside into the outside [etwas von innen nach außen gesprungen] and a thought has become flesh [ein Gedanke Fleisch geworden]. After that, to put it mildly, one is left gasping for air... The irrational has once again staged one of its great eruptions [Einbrüche] into history (and maybe history essentially consists only of such eruptions). (TB 1:591)
This kind of scenario, in which a thought, fantasy, or desire is unexpectedly realized externally—ambiguously as if from the outside—is an ordering principle in the final published version of Doderer’s *The Demons*. Chance encounters are made to coincide with concerns welling up from the inside. This phenomenon bears an affinity with what Freud called “the uncanny” (*das Unheimliche*), and thus it is not without precedent in fiction. The difficulty of knowing or deciding what to do when something appears to realize itself can also be conceived as a morphological problem: “Fulfillment recoil” arises whenever one wants to discern a culmination or declare that a particular developmental (or historical) cycle is finished and has run its course. But not all endings are of the same quality, and, depending on one’s perspective, an end may be a new beginning. A finished cycle may produce a restart—or an ending may endure in a more or less stable way, giving rise to a new (but perhaps only apparent) continuity.

Especially in biographical analyses and plot mechanics, the unworkability of the morphological format becomes apparent. Goethe’s conception of morphology supposes open and potentially endless cycles; but from the perspective of an individual life, thought and action are often conceived in terms of ends. Morphology causes limited ends and “realizations” to appear subjective in a way that blocks their interpretation as the realization of a supposedly objective morphological providence. The only perspectives from which realizations can be judged are the intents and the desires of individuals. But, as Doderer knew, especially unwilled events (or those that are only wished for) are not fulfillments but demonically charged wish fulfillments, disorienting coincidences that leave one “gasping for air” in the face of an irrational eruption.

Goethe’s mood on the very last page of book 20 of *Poetry and Truth* can also be taken as an example of “fulfillment shock.” At first glance, it might appear that there is no sense of disillusionment here, but readers of the *Italian Journey* may still see this euphoria as a partial precondition of a future disappointment. The initial reaction may be shock—a forward-looking emptiness, in which past cares echo away in the desired outcome—but disappointment may be the only way forward: what can follow such a profound (but perhaps partly retrospective) fulfillment? The conflict is resolved, the desired outcome achieved, but how should things now proceed? Unlike the end of *Poetry and Truth*, the treatment of the problem of historical and artistic fulfillment in Goethe’s conversation with Eckermann on March 11, 1828, is ironically fatalistic. “Fulfillment” here is not identical with death, but it is related to it:

—The only way out is to keep ruining oneself! [Der Mensch muß wieder ruiniert werden!]—Every exceptional individual has a certain mission [Sendung], which he is called [berufen] to bring about. Once he has accomplished it, he has no purpose on earth in this form [in dieser Gestalt], and Providence will reuse him for something else. But because everything down here happens in the course of nature,
the demons try to trip him up, over and over until he finally falls. This is what happened to Napoleon and many others. Mozart died in his thirty-sixth year, Raphael at almost the same age, and Byron was only a little older. But all had fulfilled their mission [Mission] perfectly, and then it was simply time for them to go [es war wohl Zeit daß sie gingen], so that something is left to do for others in this world, which was set up to be long-lasting. (Eckermann, Gespräch mit Goethe, 660)

The morphological point of Erfüllungs-Rückstoß is that once “form” (Gestalt) has been achieved (as the result of a development or culmination), there is nowhere to go but down. The productive energies that went into the blossoming of form cease and become static following their realization, and death (or at least “ruin”) is the precondition of continued individual contributions to a greater whole.

Goethe’s explanation here differs, at least in part, from his Orphic “Urworte,” Poetry and Truth, and the morphological writings; to Eckermann he asserts a comprehensive analogy between human life, history, and the forms and cycles of nature. Regardless of the cause of such deaths, the “morphological” or “demonic” cause was the fact that these geniuses had fulfilled their intended purpose. This “mission” was also not exclusively their own but was facilitated by “demons,” as well as the higher powers of “nature” and “providence.” The main topic of the conversation is the source of Goethe’s own creativity, and thus his own long life stands in implicit contrast to Byron, Mozart, and Raphael. Goethe does not die, and he avoids the demons by “ruining” and subsequently reinventing himself.

Doderer presents history as essentially consisting of irrational breaks and false fulfillments. Goethe’s remark to Eckermann, on the other hand, understands history like Gundolf, who allows contingency to be subsumed by overarching morphological necessity. In book 20 of Poetry and Truth, Goethe characterizes life more like Doderer as a permanent failure of learning: “we usually only learn the strategy after the campaign is over” (HA 10:183)—but he tells Eckermann that the lives of “great men” are overseen by a suprapersonal providence. History is a cosmic drama and the exclusive result of the productive energy of exemplary individuals. This is Gundolf’s thesis, but it does not conform to the more systematic and less conventional narratives of the Orphic “Urworte,” Poetry and Truth, and the morphology.

However, the naturalization of the “untimely” deaths of heroes and geniuses—rationalized so as to make them precisely timely—may be partly ironical. He tells this story to Eckermann in a rather unserious way (which Eckermann is likely to take seriously). Goethe ignores empirical-historical causation, for example, in favor of a legend about the “mission” of geniuses whom “demons will try to trip up.” His final words offer an especially implausible justification: the productivity of geniuses must come to an end “so that,
in the course of the world, which is conceived on the long term, there's something left for the rest of us to do.” Such a witty explanation may work in a conversation, but there is no reason to think that Goethe actually believed it.

With respect to Goethe’s own longevity, the line about “leaving something for others to do” implicitly gives voice to younger writers (who may have wished Goethe had a shorter career). With respect to history, the ironies of Goethe’s story take the form of latent counter-narratives and myths. They are ironic because in our time one is supposed to know better. However, many philosophies of history arguably have a similarly ironic structure. Goethe’s story of fulfillment dynamics, for all of its unseriousness, betrays an awareness of epistemological problems common to both morphology and the philosophy of history. Morphology’s diachronic idea of form can, so to speak, never decide if it is cyclical or teleological. Form-in-transformation can only be represented as an arbitrary point on a continuum, and any given moment of a cycle can only represent the underlying process metonymically. The metonymic shift from transformation to enduring form (Gestalt) freezes metamorphosis and hypostasizes morphology’s diachronic-teleological intent. A “form” in transformation, retrospectively isolated as an apparent culmination, fruition, or fulfillment, can only be a metaphor, the coloration of which always reflects value judgment and anthropomorphism. Goethe’s reading of the lives of geniuses is thus not only a “naturalization” of human history through the analogy with natural forms: the morphological conception of nature itself includes the human perspective that makes the analogy possible in the first place.

Introducing Oswald Spengler

The pitfalls of this kind of philosophy of history are most apparent in Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West (Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte, 1918 and 1922). This notorious work, more often mentioned on account of its influence than actually read, is a valuable source for ideas about the demonic, because, like Gundolf, Spengler tries to fuse the demonic and morphology. Spengler, more drastically even than Gundolf, places morphology’s method of retrospective analogization in the service of a sweeping historical hypothesis. Goethe’s remarks to Eckermann indicate that an approach like Spengler’s was always a possibility of morphology, but Goethe himself never pursued it. And he never would have, because for him morphology was a way of thinking—a medium of reflection—and not a descriptive or predictive theoretical system.

Many of Spengler’s self-proclaimed “innovations” are easily unmasked as morphological rejuvenations of the clichés of a quasi-philosophical philosophy of history. In this category is the language of “rise and fall,” “development and decay,” “blossoming and fading.” If one wanted to see an innovation
here, it would lie in the interdependence and ambiguity of opposing terms: for Spengler, “recoil” is an immanent part of the formal-developmental structure of “fulfillment,” “culmination” (Vollendung), and cannot be differentiated from “decline” (Untergang). “The history of a culture is the progressive realization of its possibilities [die fortschreitende Verwirklichung ihres Möglichen]. Culmination is synonymous with the end [Die Vollendung ist gleichbedeutend mit dem Ende]” (UdA 141). These sentences give compact expression to Spengler’s idea that every culture harbors the possibility of developing its own unique civilization; its “culmination” terminates this potential and at the same time fully realizes it (to the retrospective viewer).

For Spengler, the telos is only a passing phase, the beginning of the end. This stands in contrast with a retrospective view of history focusing on unrealized potentials or felicitous historical correspondences. This is not Spengler’s approach. For him, each cultural-historical monad has only one unique realization and its only possible outcomes are success or failure. A culture may fail to realize its potential for numerous contingent reasons, but this is irrelevant for the success stories, such as the West, which succeeded but have already passed their zenith. According to Spengler, cultures blossom into civilizations, and the latter are, by definition, in a state of decline with respect to the culture that gave rise to them. To illustrate this conception, Spengler makes a literary-historical hypothesis: “Goethe could—perhaps—have died in his younger years, but not his ‘idea.’ Faust and Tasso would not have been written, but even without this poetic manifestation, in a very mysterious sense they would nevertheless have ‘been’ ” (UdA 189). What applies here on the small scale is valid for history itself. All historical events are functionally “substitutable” (vertretbar) for other historical events within a morphologically predetermined system of inevitable realization:

The French Revolution could have been substituted [vertreten] by an event of a different form [von anderer Gestalt] and in a different place [an anderer Stelle], maybe in England or Germany. Its “idea,” . . . the transition from culture to civilization, the victory of the anorganic cosmopolis over the organic countryside, . . . was necessary, and indeed precisely at this moment [in diesem Augenblick]. . . .When an event is epoch-making, this means: it marks a necessary, fateful turning point [eine notwendige, schicksalhafte Wendung] in the course [Ablauf] of a culture. (UdA, 193)

Unlike Doderer’s “fulfillment recoil,” Spengler’s idea of “culmination” (Vollendung), though synonymous with “the end,” pretends indifference toward the effects and affects of beginnings and endings. In the big picture there is only one possible outcome, he argues; accidents or coincidences only affect the specific way in which the end is achieved. Spengler’s philosophy of history is thus the exact opposite of Doderer’s: the latter sees history as an endless
series of irrational, merely apparent fulfillments. For Doderer, no historical (or biographical) “culmination” can be the verifiable result of “demonic” entelechy. In Spengler, on the other hand, a preordained morphological superstructure provides certainty and stability, which allow contingencies to be cancelled in the process of culmination.

By positing that there is only one possible end, Spengler’s theory of substitution (Vertretung) negates the sphere of means. The point of the end itself is thereby also negated: a Vollendung from which nothing can proceed, from which nothing begins, is precisely contrary to Goethe’s morphology, which sought to imagine not only the analogical but the generative interconnection of all things ad infinitum. Rather than concentrating on forms and their genesis, Spengler’s morphology focuses on the determination of a discrete, closed, and repeatable, cyclical form of history. To the extent that history is the predetermined form of all forms, the forms themselves are only the superfluous evidence of the “morphology of world history.” For Spengler, events and actions are also morphologically structured, occurring for the sake of an unavoidable but ultimately senseless “culmination,” which is to say: for no reason at all.

This reading of cyclical form in terms of inevitable mortality gives the impression of an overelaborate nihilism, which may make sense at a cosmic scale, which makes earthly life seem diminishingly small and insignificant. But there is little reason to think, as Spengler does, that cyclical forms could be generalized in a way that would allow for prognostication. He does not argue that “everything passes away” or “all life is mortal,” but argues for a universal etiology of rise and fall. He refuses to call this fated cycle “teleology,” because this conception instrumentalizes and “rationalizes” heroic-tragic destiny (UdA 157); the idea of inevitable decline explicitly opposes both eschatological and progressive understandings of history. But these disclaimers do not mean that his morphology of history is not teleological. In Goethe’s morphology, the form of the cycle itself must be teleological in order to be identified as a cycle. In part 2 of Decline of the West, Spengler seeks to clarify this point by arguing for “local” teleologies (“culminations”) against a single unifying teleology:

I protest . . . against two assumptions that have corrupted all historical thought up to the present: against the assumption of an ultimate goal [Endziel] of all of humanity and against the denial of the existence of any kind of goals [Endziele]. Life has a purpose [Ziel]. It is the fulfillment of that which was posited [gesetzt] in its conception [Zeugung]. (UdA 613)

The beginning always already includes the end and eliminates everything between.

One could speak in Spengler’s sense of “limited” and “general” teleologies. The larger problem, however, lies in the dubious significance or
meaningfulness of the Ziele and Endziele: ultimately, the secularized and naturalized providence of Spengler’s theory is meaningless insofar as it lacks an external guarantee or reference. The discernment of “limited” teleological cycles endows life and history with a purely (but merely) immanent purpose within the morphological system. A further problem is the way that perceived cyclical “forms” are immediately identified with real cyclical, iterative, and developmental cycles; analogies are easily constructed if the points of comparison are general enough. The existence and meaning of iterative-cyclical form is a genuine question, but if it is approached in a very general way (as “nature”), then everything seems to fit.

Key arguments from the first pages of Spengler’s introduction illustrate the approach and its drawbacks. One might imagine that he is focused on classic questions of the philosophy of history, for example, the “old questions” of Kant’s 1798 “The Conflict of the Faculties”: Does history reflect a general progress of mankind? Is it possible to conceive of history a priori? According to Kant, only a transcendental a priori would allow the form and ends of history to be known. Historical or economic trends in the small scale—the perception of busts and booms, advances and setbacks—are ambiguous with respect to the question of ultimate ends, and the relevant time scales for measuring cycles are never completely certain. Only if the condition of the possibility of history can be established can its direction and telos be guaranteed (even if the precise path is unforeseeable). Kant treats this question with strategic irony, whereas Spengler offers a relatively prosaic answer: the a priori of history can only be perceived empirically, a posteriori. Hindsight and comparative analysis—after the end of many histories, cultures, and civilizations—make it possible to perceive the general form of history.

Beyond the systematic and theoretical aspects of this question, however, Spengler is pragmatically motivated. He wants to know how to make history at the end of history. To act historically, he argues, one must know what history will do and what outcomes it will favor. Lacking this knowledge, historical ends are not directly pursued by individual actors but indirectly through the “cunning of reason.” It has been argued (for example, by Nietzsche and Reinhart Koselleck) that it is detrimental to human agency if history is viewed as a suprapersonal “spirit.” Spengler, however, explicitly rejects human freedom as a guiding force in history. He claims, in effect, to have discovered the system of “the cunning of reason.” Those who know the system will have a competitive advantage over those who do not. This peculiar “freedom” thus claims competitive advantage, motivation, and rhetorical leverage for those who pursue it. History, in Spengler’s morphological conception, is a force of nature to which humans must relate in much the same way as they relate to death. And since the outcome is the same no matter what, Spengler advocates an ethics of maximizing self-interest within the preset limits of history.

Spengler, unlike other philosophers of history (and despite his claim to use a comparative historical method), claims that European modernity offers an
ultimate historical standpoint. But the problem of retrospectivity is a problem for all philosophies of history. For Kant, for example, the human *Anlage* (“predisposition” as a universal-transcendental preset) cannot be known unless it betrays itself in a historical sign. Such a sign allows the a priori of the human *Anlage* to be determined, and on this basis the course of history can be known (but not predicted in individual cases). Spengler, rather than looking for a singular sign or event, claims to use a comparative method to discover the underlying form of human nature in a comprehensive system of analogies between nature and all recorded histories. This approach is conditioned by his lateness with respect to his own culture and other civilizations—and by the sheer volume of cross-cultural data available in the early twentieth century. Spengler’s relativist historicism includes non-European histories and developing ethnographic ideas, but he aims to produce a monolithic idea of History. By pretending to use the taxonomic and tabulative methods of the natural sciences, his idea of the human *Anlage* reflects the natural diversity of human fauna as reflected in the variety of human history and culture. He produces parallel analogical currents to show consistent direction and development—but the story always ends with decline. To the extent one can speak of a moral to the story, it emerges from a fabric of historical parallels, which are totalized into a supposedly inescapable pattern. The scope of this systematization is apparent in Spengler’s tabulation of the “simultaneous” epochs of art and spirit (UdA 71–72), which break down various historical cultures according to rubrics such as “Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter” and “Prehistory, Culture, Civilization.” Spengler claims that these analogical patterns, which are presented as evidence of an inescapable cosmic destiny, are the result of inductive analysis, but his approach is transparently deductive.

Spengler insists that his non-Eurocentric approach represents a “Copernican” revolution in the concept of history (UdA 24), but his terminology is conventional. His system is a hyper-historicism that imagines the development of man in a multiplicity of possibilities that are inevitably defined by death and decline. “Culture” blossoms into unique symbolic forms that define the historical identity of a people, but once these forms are fully articulated, there is (as Goethe said to Eckermann) “nothing left to do,” and “old” civilizations fall to the vitality of “young” cultures. Histories end in civilization, and civilization is defined by empty repetition, expansion, and eventual self-destruction. Artistically epigonal and politically imperialist, civilizations assert themselves mechanically until they collapse under the imbalance of internal and external forces.

The developmental paradigm that Spengler attempts to establish in cross-cultural and comparative historical analogies is at best debatable and at worst disingenuous. The length of his book is the result of the overstated ambition of its central thesis, which is relentlessly recuperated in more than a thousand pages. This fundamental imbalance between Spengler’s thesis and its proof
causes the latter to outweigh the former. This overabundance of material is only supportable to the extent his specific narratives and interpretations offer something different from his repetitive metanarratives. Also, because the theory, though influential, has been the object of decisive refutations, I will now turn my attention to the methodological sections of part 1 of The Decline of the West, in which the demonic often merely amplifies the pathos of the conception. At the same time, however, key elements of Goethe’s more systematic articulations are implicitly retained.

Fate in Spengler’s Morphology of History

The “morphological” basis of Spengler’s fatalistic philosophy of history grants a specific access to the problem of mortality and finitude. I take this partly from Adorno, who implies that Spengler was a lesser, more populist philosophical Heidegger. For Adorno, Spengler was the better Heidegger, precisely because he was a more transparent historical symptom, and his motivations were more transparent and taken less seriously by professional philosophers. The coauthor of The Dialectic of Enlightenment does not treat Spengler as a taboo figure because he is a symptom of Enlightenment’s regressive possibilities. One might even argue that Spengler, Heidegger, and Adorno himself tried to historicize the drawbacks of instrumental reason and positivism in the absence of metaphysics. Thus in Spengler’s sense, all three may be seen as “substitutable” (vertretbar) at the level of functional equivalence. To be clear, the point of this substitution is not guilt by association, but rather, following Adorno, to read Spengler in the context of recognized problems of modernity.

In this context, Goethe’s idea of morphology gives voice and authority to Spengler’s prototypically anti-rationalist discourse. Like Gundolf, Spengler reads Goethe neither as a philologist nor as a critic—not as any kind of professional—but as a disciple. Spengler presents himself as a mouthpiece, identifying himself with Goethe so intensely as to eliminate critical distance. Goethe’s words, which often lack quotation marks or a reference to their source, only say what Spengler thinks. His use of Goethe is often clearly deceptive or wrong—but he may be a deceived deceiver. And even if morphology is only a legitimating discourse for ends that are both highly suspect and completely conventional, Spengler’s ability to ventriloquize Goethe may also be a precondition for his work’s strange persuasiveness and popular success.

When it comes to specific differences between Spengler and Goethe, the question of morphology and “fate” is answered very differently. Spengler, like Gundolf, would see his difference with Goethe on this account not as a mistake on his part but as the result of the changed perspectives of the new century. This historical difference in turn depends on morphology’s inherent
ambiguity with respect to questions of “optimism” or “pessimism.” Goethe’s morphology does not emphasize decline, mortality, and death but instead implicitly focuses on birth and rebirth. Spengler, on the other hand, absolutizes mortality in the discrete finitude of cultural monads. This combination of mortality and relativism may also recall Herder (one of Goethe’s most important sources).\(^\text{12}\) Spengler’s morphology might also be taken as a variant of Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return, except that Spengler’s exposed “de-” prefixes (unters prefixes in German) such as de-mise or de-cline conspicuously replace Nietzsche’s trans- and super- (über-) compounds.

Such comparisons, when articulated, make Spengler’s shortcomings clear. But without such differentiations, his theory appears close enough to Goethe and to other philosophies of history to produce borrowed plausibility. Spengler lends authority to assertive theorizations by claiming inspiration from Goethe, Nietzsche, and others. Nietzsche is a possible source of Spengler’s thesis that it is characteristic of the West to think historically and imagine itself upon a historical stage. He claims that the modern Occident is uniquely possessed of an acute awareness of time and history that is only haphazardly articulated in other cultures. Spengler’s own system is presented as the culmination of this awareness. *The Decline of the West* proclaims itself a comprehensive and objective science that will allow “the form” of world history to be “known” (UdA 21).

The analogical deep structure of all known history is supposed to allow accurate predictions, but this aspect of Spengler’s method is more than a little contradictory. His conception is split between “future” and “fate.”\(^\text{13}\) He claims that his methods are retrospective and inductive—and that the fate he predicts is unavoidable—but this does not stop him from invoking an ideal of futurity which, by his argument, should not exist. He wants to do more than impotently confirm the inevitable; thus he predicts inevitable decline in order to incite individuals to action—but he avoids the activist model of an “inconvenient truth” (which invokes a looming “fate” in order to avert it). Spengler paradoxically combines extreme fatalism with activism: decline is unavoidable, but the dominant affect of his book is not resignation but passion. The latter is expressed above all in the prophetic status he attributes to his own work. *The Decline of the West* will give rise to a “philosophy of the future” (UdA 6), a philosophy that depends on the certainty of decline. The case is terminal, death is inevitable, but this knowledge is, for Spengler, the basis for rational action: culture’s fall into civilization (and subsequent collapse) cannot be avoided, but individuals, including individual nations, can choose their own roles. The idea of “substitutability” (Vertretbarkeit) means that, though the big picture cannot be changed, knowledge of it will give a comparative advantage in competition with others. In this phase of the argument, Spengler’s “philosophy of the future” emerges as esoteric opportunism—hedonism and nationalism—more focused on going down heroically\(^\text{14}\) than on resisting the inevitable. Spengler’s relativist method is thus negated by his
chauvinist conclusion that, though the fate is unavoidable, the knowledge of it will help Germany to assume a leading role in the West’s final march toward the abyss. Thus Spengler—following a critique that can be traced from Hermann Heller to Adorno and beyond—gives a theoretical alibi to the practice of domination.

Spengler acts as if acceptance of his oracle necessarily means accepting his interpretation of it. But it may be, as Adorno implies, that the relation of the prophecy to Spengler’s politics and ethics is not coherent. The political message of *The Decline of the West* can be easily set aside. Without denying that Spengler’s message may do damage through those who seek the rationale he provides, his theory’s politics was not essentially more convincing in the 1910s and 1920s than it is today. He believed that human and historical possibilities could be rethought on the basis of morphological “knowledge,” and this idea, combined with his pessimism, certainly resonated in his time, but it presumably mostly did so in ways that reinforced existing behaviors and opinions.

Thus I would claim that nothing revolutionary came from Spengler, either in opposition to his thesis or through attempts to follow it. But much may have been activated and channeled through his work, and if a systematic point is to be rescued here, it pertains to the role that Spengler assigned to his own theoretical claims. The implicit dynamics are similar to those of the “end of man” thesis from Foucault’s *The Order of Things*: in claiming the ability to perceive the approaching end of a specific, deterministically conceived epistemic constellation, the *episteme* in question—ultimately the present one—is made visible, as if from the outside, and thereby implicitly destabilized. Or, the other way around, such an “end” is performatively pronounced in the hope of producing the described epistemic break. The inherent contradiction between these two options is a productive one: it rests upon the performative bracketing of epistemic determinants, which, assuming they exist at all, may continue to do their own thing in spite of every attempt to distance them into a hypothetical “meta.”¹⁵

Such exercises in speculative defamiliarization may have a momentum of their own, even in a case such as Spengler’s. The perspectives introduced in the juxtaposition of Spengler and Foucault make it possible to define morphology in a way that is at once more general and more precise: morphology is the “science,” after the end of philosophy, of accurately reading the clock of history—or of persuasively claiming to do so. This kind of speculation is never purely theoretical; there is always an oracular implication. Morphology in this sense is the art of timeliness—the *pseudoscience* of claiming to know what is auspicious. This function would traditionally fall to artists and writers, rhetoricians and politicians, but Spengler’s idea is to try to formalize it and put his insight at everyone’s disposal. Science is only a veneer, however—and Spengler in any case denies that morphology is a modern (positivist) science. The art of morphology can only be informal divinatory
cultural analysis based on intuition, which may produce—with the help of good luck and eloquence—the appearance of success.

To put it in the terms of the demonic in Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth*: even in very small events, the difference between chance and agency often cannot be resolved, and the final grounds of even one timely occurrence or act often cannot be recounted in a way that would control for all variables. Thus by Goethe’s standard, Spengler’s claims for historical morphology are either mistaken or disingenuous. But the question of the basis and motivation of action has precedents in the demonic: knowledge and desire influence action, and can be used to influence them. This much is a commonplace, but the demonic, for Goethe, exerts itself through *impossibility*, through the blockage and obstruction of knowledge and desire, and he posits that this is the typical situation of historical actors most of the time. Perhaps Spengler understood this action theory well enough to try to manipulate his readers at the level of knowledge and desire, despite the fact that the schematics of his theory can be read as contradicting it. What Spengler appears to believe—what his theory extensively *shows*—is that the era of the blossoming of culture and art is over for the West; the noxious forms of “civilization”—empire and expansion, money and bureaucracy—will henceforth be the rule. The clock cannot be turned back. Spengler thus passes himself off as a futurist and not a conservative, but his “philosophy of the future” remains conservative in its claim to differentiate the possible from the impossible in order to pick the morphologically preordained winners. And the assumption that the possible is intrinsically more desirable than the impossible is psychologically naive compared with Goethe’s conception.

Inescapability with respect to the spirit of the age is “demonic” for Spengler, and the capitalist industrialist Cecil Rhodes is the emblem of the possibilities that remain in modernity. But the lure of the demonic impossibility in Goethe’s sense may also have been cast by this thesis. Spengler overtly politicizes his own theory, but its fatalism can be interpreted differently—*against* the spirit of the modern age, which Spengler himself depicts as odious. His work’s ambivalent “futurism” must have been discarded or modified by all but the most docile readers, whereas his analysis of history and modernity could have energized opposition (from right or left) to “modern civilization.”16 His bleak outlook on the modern world is ultimately more persuasive than his political agenda. The “fate” he perceives may be written in stone, but it remains open to interpretation and the correlated freedom of action. The provisional acceptance of Spengler’s “fate,” rather than producing fatalism or resignation, can just as easily produce unexpected forms of inspiration. Worried that readers will get the wrong message, Spengler emphasizes the futility of striving against fate. Resistance, he claims, only leads to the repetition of the exhausted possibilities of past eras. The epigonal strivings of modern artists are condemned as inauthentic and eclectic, classicist and romantic, yearning for a state of past wholeness. Ironically, this is what Schiller meant
by the word “sentimental” more than a century earlier. Spengler’s dismissal of all attempts to go against the spirit of one’s own age—even though these efforts are themselves inevitable—raises the question: is Spengler’s idea of fate adequately paradoxical? The foreknowledge of fate can produce action, despair, or acceptance. If a fate is truly a fate, then the attempt to thwart it only helps bring it about. Spengler’s brand of fatalism—of collaborating with fate—thus exhibits a lack of irony with respect to the possible reactions to “impossibility.” This lack of irony about his work’s utility subjects Spengler himself to a dramatic irony that makes his work appear primarily autobiographical. The Decline of the West produces an unintentional self-caricature: Spengler casts himself as “a prophet of gloom and doom,” and his performance in this role undoubtedly contributed to his book’s popularity. Later authors of pop philosophy, pseudoscience, and punditry perceived the marketing strategy. Successful popularization did not completely cancel out Decline’s specific claims and messages, but it made it into a vehicle of divergent motivations that cannot be reduced to a single ideology or line of reception.

Demons of Warp and Weft (Goethe in Spengler)

I see no reason to doubt the words of the foreword to Decline’s 1922 republication: “I take my method from Goethe and my questions from Nietzsche” (UdA IX). “Method” here certainly refers to “morphology,” following Decline’s subtitle, “Outline of a Morphology of World History.” As I have shown, Spengler’s morphology drastically departs from Goethe’s—but this does not mean that it has no basis in Goethe. And, setting aside theoretical systematics, Goethe’s sheer ubiquity in Spengler is astonishing. The name undoubtedly occurs with more frequency than any other; citations and allusions also abound. In addition, “the Faustian” (das Faustische, adjective faustisch) characterizes the modern Occidental epoch; this equation of the Faustian and the “modern,” though not entirely unprecedented, is extreme in its scope and systematic intention.

Goethe’s ubiquity in itself does not mean much. Spengler’s appropriations, in the language of his own theory, are cases of “pseudomorphosis”—a form of appropriation that syncretically distorts what it appropriates to fit its own terms. Like Gundolf, who skews Goethe’s morphology toward “fate” by an overemphasis of the Orphic Dämon, Spengler dismantles Goethe’s architecture and puts the various concepts contained by the demonic to his own uses. Goethe viewed the demonic as a private (sub-conceptual) and only indirectly communicable medium of reflection, whereas Spengler makes it a part of his universal morpho-history. He implicitly recognizes the not fully rationalizable and communicable aspects, but this does not stop him from schematically reducing Goethe’s conception. For Goethe, Urworte and aperçus allow
countless individual understandings and half communications, which may produce illuminating effects in private conversation, but the demonic is not a fixed system, structure, or terminology. It is a semi-medium for talking about the ineffable. Spengler was aware of this unsystematic, dialogical aspect, but he uses it in the service of his most extravagant claims—for example, that Goethe was the Socrates of our era, whereas Kant is our Aristotle. This is typical of Spengler’s use of historical typologies that often prefer placement in a framework over specificity. He sees himself as an inheritor of the intuitive, uninstitutionalized philosophies of Socrates and Goethe (UdA 68), but, contradicting this rejection of logic and systematics, his own theory is hyper-schematic.

In Spengler’s system of historical epistemes, Goethe’s way of writing about the demonic might be categorized as an example of the “magical” un- or anti-form of the arabesque, an indefinite spiraling figure that Spengler associates with the imageless relation of text and script in early Christian and Islamic culture. For Spengler, however, the demonic corresponds to a “Faustian” idea of the infinite—of the effortful striving of the individual Dämon against the limits of time, knowledge, and mortality. This drive manifests itself in the unachievable will to freeze, close off, grasp, and represent infinite “becoming” (Werden) in a single moment. This conception evokes key lines of Faust I and Faust II (HA 3:57, 3:348), but Spengler never reflects on the potential problems of basing his theory of modernity on a character in a literary work, who is further identified with Goethe’s own beliefs and ideas.

In Spengler’s typology of cultural styles and characteristics, Goethe may belong to more than one category, whereas Spengler, despite identifying with Goethe, strives to be as Faustian as possible in his theorization of the West’s inevitable end. The words of the Earth-spirit (Erdgeist) to Faust apply to Spengler’s reading of Goethe: “You are like the spirit that you can grasp, but not like me” (Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst, nicht mir, HA 3:24). Spengler sees Goethe as purely “Faustian,” “Western,” and “modern” and views his own “morphology” as an equally Occidental product. Self-critical potentials that might have emerged from Goethe are thus repressed in the interest of Decline’s central dogmas.

Goethe is the avowed source of Spengler’s mythology of the “Faustian,” but this is relatively unrelated to Spengler’s theory; “Goethe” merely swirls arabesque-like in the background. A methodological centerpiece can be located, however, in section 9 of the introduction (Intro. 9) and in the parallel section (I.ii.19) from the second long chapter of Decline’s first part, entitled “The Problem of World History”; section I.ii.19 is part of this chapter’s second half, subtitled “The Idea of Fate and the Principle of Causality” (“Schicksalsidee und Kausalitätsprinzip”). Another signpost unites Intro.9 and I.ii.19: the Dämon stanza of the Orphic “Urworte” (UdA 35, 206); Intro. 9 only cites “characteristic form, living and self-developing” (geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt, UdA 35), whereas I.ii.19 quotes the stanza at greater length.
This double invocation of Goethe’s *Dämon* as the source of Spengler’s idea of developmental entelechy localizes the demonic in *Decline*’s methodological sections. In Intro. 9, Spengler criticizes the causal-narrative and Euro-anthropocentric biases of nineteenth-century conceptions of history. He opposes their approach to his own “Copernican” attempt to show the “natural form” (*Gestalt*) of “the total happening of the world” (*das Weltgeschehen*); the epistemic object of morphology “resid[es] within the depths,” in deep structures that become “evident to the unprejudiced gaze” (UdA 34). Spengler’s morphology is declaredly “developmental” and diachronic, but it is not concerned with the “substitutable” epiphenomena of events, which are contingent in comparison to the “total happening of the world.” Spengler’s “seasonal” schema for historical development further structures and organizes time in a way that spatially conceives historical *individuals*—including individual cultures—as substitutable elements in a grid. Both the outcome—the “fate”—and the development that produces it are static and fixed. History is divided up in analogy with the natural life cycle or the ages of man: “youth, ascent, blossoming, and decline” (*Jugend, Aufstieg, Blütezeit, Verfall*, UdA 36). This sequence reflects temporal progression, which Spengler recognizes as metaphorical, but argues that his concrete application of it will transform it into a strict terminology (UdA 36). This categorical impulse conceives time timeless and maps the form of finite biological individuality onto history and culture, which are perceived as comparably regular, predictable, and finite.

In Spengler, the individuality of *geprägte Form* is conceived as a state of endless transfer to and from suprapersonal symbolic forms that delimit cultural monads in contrast to one another. Individuals realize the development of cultural totalities, the individuality of which expresses itself through individuals. This approach presupposes the morphological identity of individual and totality without dialectical mediation. The result is an aesthetization of world history (which is reduced to the history of cultural formations), and the comparative history of cultural forms is magnified into universal history. The basis and result of this broad synthesis is the presupposition of parallelism in all spheres of a given culture: art, architecture, custom, society, government, and even the forms of language, math, and science all correspond to the same underlying symbolic-archetypal-epistemic paradigm.

“I recall Goethe” (UdA 35). This evocative sentence from Intro. 9 does not lead one to expect a systematic methodology, and what follows is in fact a whirlwind of paraphrases and allusions. *Wilhelm Meister* is the only work referred to by name, but it apparently stands for the idea of the Bildungsroman. Spengler claims that Goethe “always, constantly, drew out the life, the development, of his figures, their becoming and not their being” (UdA 35). This introduces the opposition between “becoming” (*Werden*) and “that which has finished becoming” (*das Gewordene*), which is a persistent systematic
differentiation in part 1 of the *Decline*, in which Spengler uses the idea of developmental *Werden* as a weapon against positivist historiography’s exclusive focus on facts and causation. Spengler claims that the *representation of becoming*—of organic development (*Entwicklung*) as opposed to “process” (UdA 203)—is the specific characteristic of Occidental art and of the modern *episteme*: whereas the art of antiquity (supposedly) valued the Apollonian beauty of closed forms, Faustian art autobiographically, self-referentially, and symbolically depicts the development out of which the work emerged. Like Goethe in his comments on the debate between Cuvier and Saint-Hilaire, Spengler prefers organological development to “construction”:

Here [in Goethe] the world as mechanism did not stand in opposition to the world as organism, nor did he oppose dead and living nature, nor law [*Gesetz*] and form [*Gestalt*]. Every line he wrote as a natural scientist was meant to illustrate the shape of things in transformation [*sollte die Gestalt des Werdenden vor Augen Stellen*], to illuminate “characteristic form, living, self-developing” [*geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt*]. (UdA 35)

In a quasi-Pauline language, Spengler sets the future above the past, developing form over fixed law, the living over the dead—but his own theory posits development in terms of an iron law: *Decline* tells the story of inevitable rise and fall in the exhaustion of cultural paradigms and characteristic forms. Goethe’s *geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt*, however, makes no such claims. Insofar as Spengler’s invocation of *geprägte Form* contradicts both Goethe and Spengler’s own theory, it would appear to be primarily rhetorical. There is, however, an additional systematic claim, according to which the morphological “demon” becomes a figure of typology. The type in Spengler’s sense (*das Typische*, UdA 36) does not correspond to *Dämon* (as individuality) but to Goethe’s fourth *Urwort*: reductive-generalizing *Ananke* who overshadows “life” with the narrative closures that are typically necessary. Spengler introduces this generalizing moment together with his idea of contingency (*Tyche*) as “substitutability” (*Vertretbarkeit*). *Tyche* with her “fickle fortunes” (*wechselnden Geschicke*, UdA 36) is mere contingency; she is that which could have happened differently without making an essential difference. Spengler, as he says, seeks “the necessary in the unruly surplus of the contingent [*das Notwendige in der unbändigen Fülle des Zufälligen*]” (UdA 36).

Thus an idea of development that purportedly comes from Goethe is made synonymous with Spengler’s idea of fate. The “tychical” surplus that manifests itself in the time of development only adds aesthetic value and the appearance of singularity to the typical fate that necessarily befalls all life:

And just as he [Goethe] traced the development of the form of the plant from the leaf, as well as the rise of the vertebrate type, and
the transformations of geological layers—the fate of nature, not its causality [das Schicksal der Natur, nicht ihre Kausalität]—I will likewise trace the language of forms in human history [die Formensprache der menschlichen Geschichte], their periodic structure, their organic logic, which develops out of the abundance of sensible details. (UdA 35)

Spengler wants to “develop” his system in analogy with Goethe’s “development” of the forms of nature (so wie . . . soll hier). He thus circularly supposes the form of development both in his object (human history) and in his own method (which will proceed by developing). “Just like” Goethe who hypothesized that “everything is leaf” (Alles ist Blatt), Spengler sees a universal form underlying all development. Just as the leaf is supposed as the base unit of the plant, and the plant is “pure leaf” in transformation, so human development and history are also supposed to display “organic logic” and cyclical periodicity.

However, as in Goethe’s morphology, differences of scale and time scale as well as the perspectival variability of historical beginnings and endings impede the application of this method to human society, culture, and history. Kant and Nietzsche, Weber and Foucault, Koselleck and Blumenberg, all take this kind of question seriously: How can a philosophy of history identify with certainty the singular beginnings of “cycles” or epochs? How can the cyclical vs. developmental forms be unambiguously determined? What motivates and necessitates historical cycles? How does this conception relate to history conceived in layers, as a web or fabric? Are these only metaphors, and if so, can one choose between them? Is the recourse to metaphor an index of human intents and anthropocentric perspectives? In light of such questions, Spengler’s shortcomings are evident—but that does not mean that his work can entirely ignore these considerations.

His preference for thetic overstatement and exaggerated univocality thus produces rhetorical benefits at the expense of internal coherence. Self-critique is not Spengler’s style, but this does not stop him from aggressively attacking ideas he opposes. He argues, for example, that his morpho-developmental idea of history avoids the misconceptions of words like “process,” “causation,” and “motivation.” This critique is brought to bear against Marx and Darwin, who only perceive causation in the lowest terms of sheer material survival, “hunger and love” (UdA 202–4). Against this, Spengler points to the varied forms of human culture, which reflect a morpho-anthropological base comprised of complex form-drives. The mechanisms of these drives are morphologically determined fates that express themselves through the “inner certitude” (innere Gewissheit) of individuals (UdA 198). This “feeling” (Gefühl, UdA 201) corresponds to a talent for the forms through which individual and collective destinies come to fruition. According to this model, individuals and cultures are possessed by predetermined culminations. The
“inner certitude” of being in touch with one’s self and one’s time is felt in individual experience and “demonically” dictated in view of collective ends:

Whoever lives in streaming ardor [in strömendem Überschwang] toward an unknown “something” [einem Etwas] does not need to know anything about purpose or usefulness [von Zweck und Nutzen]. He feels himself as the meaning of that which will happen [als Sinn dessen, was geschehen wird]. This was the belief in the star, which never forsook Caesar and Napoleon as little as it did other doers of great deeds [die großen Täter anderer Art]. (UdA 199)

Ironically, the more the individual experiences itself as an end in itself, the more it is instrumentalized—the more it falls under the “demonic” control of “the total happening of the world.” The subjective feeling of demonic self-certainty is the medium through which morphologically predetermined forms and cosmic patterns are realized through (not by) geniuses, heroes, and leaders and dictators.27

The preestablished harmony of morphological reason (which reads all actions within a given cultural paradigm as symbolic and productive of that paradigm) combined with Spengler’s refusal of the principle of sufficient reason (which is blind to “the mystery of becoming” [UdA 203]), more than earns him his reputation as an irrationalist. He is also not alone in this, however: elements of his “irrationalism” are common to much more reputable conceptions.28 Pointing this out does not mean rehabilitating Spengler—nor is it an attempt to discredit others by associating them with him. Rather, the idea is to establish a fine line between Spengler and the many others who have offered critiques of instrumental reason. Instead of posing historical causation as a problem, he exploits its fragility through a tendentious “theory,” whose greatest harm—and asset—may be that it reveals the risks associated with the critique of reason.

Spengler is, however, occasionally more than just a negative example of the risks inherent to the twentieth century’s attempts to come to terms with positivism and rationalization. Other possibilities emerge whenever Spengler fails to reproduce his main thesis and unintentionally allows “tychic” surpluses to emerge. This occurs, for example, in a passage on Michelangelo, whom Spengler imagines standing before an unshaped block of marble. This image, Spengler declares, expresses “the cosmic fear of that which has already come into being [die Weltangst vor dem Gewordenen], the fear of death that art seeks to banish [bannen] into a shifting form [durch eine bewegte Form]” (UdA 354). This echoes Goethe’s “flight behind an image” (Flucht hinter ein Bild, HA 10:176), and the identification of “that which has already become” (das Gewordene) with death thus coherently reflects another aspect of Goethe’s idea of the demonic: the refugee from “what has become (impossible)” flees into what might be and what might have been.
Here, in opposition to Spengler’s main thesis, art’s attempt to banish “what was” is conceived as an allegory of the overcoming of death. Art reanimates the dead positivity of an ended historical world. “Morphology” in this sense differs significantly from Spengler’s official understanding. The latter urges an attitude of *amor fati* with respect to decline, whereas the confrontation of artist and raw material is poised between metamorphosis (rebirth) and finitude (death). This is the demonic uncertainty that provokes a flight into images. Such a flight may not permanently solve or even stabilize the underlying crisis, but the uncut stone reflects sheer potentiality and a lack of predetermination. Spengler here recognizes the ambivalence of the demonic, which implicitly contradicts his schematic version of morphology. Art’s transformative drive to sublimate death corresponds to Spengler’s theoretical instrumentalization of death, but whereas Spengler presents a one-way street, Michelangelo’s artistic-morphological decision reflects ongoing indeterminateness: the uncut stone stands for each individual’s attempt to symbolically answer morphology’s life-or-death question of the possibility of future developments. In Spengler’s theory, the dead facticity of the uncut stone is all that matters, whereas Michelangelo’s “demonic” nature constantly sought to shape the dead matter of the past (UdA 354). The demonic character in this sense is not possessed by a morphologically preordained fate or a feeling of “inner certitude,” but by an *inner conflict* generated by the attempt to come to terms with the demonic (in Goethe’s sense) as a placeholder for death and the unknown—for the questions to which religion and philosophy have perennially sought answers.

The Michelangelo sentence reflects an accurate understanding that can be traced to Goethe; it also shows that the appearance of a “demonic character” is the by-product of a given character’s confrontation with the demonic ambiguity of morphology’s lowest terms, which push toward forms of sublimation and overcoming that are declared impossible in Spengler’s philosophy of history. This may be only a small lapse, an instance of evidence that subtly undercuts the argument it is meant to support, but it is not difficult to find larger systematic contradictions, motivated by the evident obstacles to interpreting history as pure morpho-demonic fate. In particular, Spengler’s strict historicism contradicts his meta-history: he is forced to admit that there is not always a direct connection between the personal and the suprapersonal, between the individual *Dämon* and the demonic force of morphology. Demonic historicism is thus supplemented by a theory of pseudomorphosis that supposes the existence of cross-cultural influences capable of obstructing the pure development of cultural monads; individuals can likewise interfere with their own development if they strive to produce forms that are not proper to their own culture and demonically dictated episteme.

“Non-demonic” impersonal, intrapersonal, or trans-historical epistemic cross-currents may be relegated to the status of contingencies, but they cannot be completely denied. Thus at the end of I.ii.19, Spengler presents a kind
of secularization thesis based on Goethe’s idea of the demonic from book 20 of Poetry and Truth:

In the [modern] reality [Wirklichkeit] of conscious being [des wachen Daseins], two worlds are woven together, that of observation [Beobachtung = the modern way of distanced seeing] and that of abandonment [Hingebung = the original experience of life as pure unprecedented happening], just as in a Brabant tapestry warp and weft come together to “knit” [wirken] the image. In order to be available [vorhanden] to understanding in any way, every law must have once been discovered—and that means experienced [erlebt]—within the history of spirit [Geistesgeschichte] as something that was brought about by fate [eine Schicksalsfügung]. Every fate appears in a sensible costume—persons, deeds, scenes, gestures—through which natural laws are at work [am Werke]. The life of primitive man was abandoned to the demonic unity of fate [die dämonische Einheit des Schicksalhaften], but in the consciousness of individuals in mature cultures [im Bewußtsein reifer Kulturmenschen], the contradiction [der Widerspruch] between this early and their own late image of the world [jenes frühen und dieses späten Weltbildes] can never be silenced. (UdA 207)

This passage contrasts the modern perspective of retrospectivity, which includes Spengler’s own morphological vision, with the “demonic” omnipresence and intensity of reality for pre-cultural man. Spengler opposes a primitive state characterized by “certainty” and “unity” to a developed state characterized by consciousness and doubt. The self-doubt expresses itself, at least partly, in modernity’s inability to authentically identify with its fate in the way that primitive man supposedly did.

In the context of fate, the loom metaphor may seem predictable, but there are no Norns or Parcae here, only a fixed fabric that presumably bears an image—of the world. This figure of a world image (Weltbild) defined by ambivalence implicitly cites Poetry and Truth’s reflections on the demonic. The wovenness of the image stands for a perpetual effect of perceptual ambiguity, defined by the retrospective idealization of primitive life and, on the other hand, by the realization that the “rational” modern era is ruled by fates that are already finished. Out of this split between absent primal unity and the awareness of an established rational world order (to which one is subjected but with which one cannot identify), a woven image appears; its unity is composite, artificial, figural, oscillating like a Vexierbild between an imagined picture of the whole and the partially obstructed imagination of oneself as a part of this same image.

In Poetry and Truth, the loom image of “warp and weft” (Zettel und Einschlag, Spengler’s Kette und Einschlag) configures the irreducibility of the demonic in every conceivable world order:
Although this demonic [jenes Dämonische] can manifest itself in everything that is corporeal and incorporeal [in allem Körperlichen und Unkörperlichen]—and indeed expresses itself most notably in animals—it nevertheless stands, above all, in the most astonishing relationship [im wunderbarsten Zusammenhang] with man and comprises a power [Macht] which, though not opposed [entgegengesetzt] to the moral order of the world [die moralische Weltordnung], crosses through and cancels it [sie durchkreuzt] in a way that could allow the one to count as the warp [Zettel] and the other as the weft [Einschlag]. (HA 10:177)

Unlike Spengler’s loom, Goethe—more like Max Weber’s “iron cage” (stahlhartes Gehäuse)—depicts the ongoing relation of idea and realization, predictability and unpredictability, rationality and irrationality, norm and exception, in the (modern) world. What holds the extremes together and brings them into focus is the idea of an interweaving or “crossing” of opposed yet interlocking views, which join to “knit themselves into an image.” The tapestry fuses perspectives which, taken separately, would either represent a totally rationalized causality or a completely unreflected natural order. The extremes belong to an omniscient God and, on the other hand, to animals. Such limit-attitudes are inaccessible to Spengler’s “civilized” humans, who experience this double perspective as a fabricated unity whose illusionary quality, though perhaps occasionally evident in moments of unraveling, is habitually overlooked. According to the logic of this metaphor, the perception of a morphologically predetermined fate can only be the result of an artificial synthetic unity. The supposed “demonic” unity experienced by primitive man, by contrast, only perceives itself as a fate and thereby de-realizes all other orders for as long as this perspective is intact. In humans, this is a formula of megalomania: if I am a fate and I know it and I affirm it (rather than questioning it), then I imagine that I am in no way subject to the world because it is entirely subject to me.

In Poetry and Truth, the demonic manifests itself as the appearance of reason in beings (such as animals) or circumstances (such as coincidences) that are either ambiguously devoid of reason or possessed by unknown reasons. For Goethe as for Spengler, individuals are regularly but unpredictably confronted with such crossroads that force a decision between the fundamentally retrospective (and often unfulfillable) demands of sufficient reason and the much more immediate competing claims of highly mobile reasons and rationalizations. Thus, even if the “moral order of the world” (whether in a theological or merely sociological sense) is in fact an airtight system—of laws, determination, causes and effects, fates and providences—this is not the aspect it shows to humans, who are left to interpret it ex post facto. Spengler clearly prefers the attitude of subjection (Hingebung), of giving one’s self uncritically to the force of one’s own representations, which are, according
to his theory, never really “one’s own” but are dictated by the morphological force of history. Retrospective critical reason, on the other hand, only impedes us in being and becoming ourselves. Spengler thus envies “the life of primitive man” for its “demonic unity,” its idealized primal ability, like that of Napoleon or Caesar, to live its own representations—to just live life—free of the reason and doubt (Sorge) that cloud the Faustian sense of self.33

This leads me, in conclusion, to suggest that the demonic, and not morphology, is the more essential Goethean inheritance in Spengler’s classic meta-history. Decline flattens the idea of morphology to such an extent that it only shares the name with Goethe’s conception. The latter, though available to a dogmatic reading, was not itself doctrinaire, whereas the demonic more obviously inflects Spengler’s sub-systematic thinking. Especially Tyche is that which Spengler most seeks to eliminate or contain. Spengler’s partial adoption of Goethe’s idea of demonically inspired character also produces an exemplary mystification that he is unable to theoretically sustain. “Demonic” heroes like Caesar or Cecil Rhodes are supposed to have a direct connection with the universe (in keeping with Goethe’s motto Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse), but Spengler is forced to interpret them as epigones, as ideals of pre-modern life. The psychology of the demonic character supposedly corresponds with the prehistoric unity of being, but this contradicts morphology’s deterministic historicism. The word “demonic” in Spengler thus refers to the sheer appearance of an undivided being, but, in drawing on Goethe’s conception, it unintentionally introduces a problem of the optics through which such “demonic” appearances are produced in the first place. Spengler tries to suppress this problem, but his reflections on the demonic (and the related idea of pseudomorphosis) reveal modernity’s divided, layered, historical—geschichtetes and geschichtliches—consciousness to be demonic (in its lack of unity) and at the same time productive of the demonic (in idealized unities).

To the extent that Goethe’s idea of the demonic is conceived as open and endlessly theorizable in religions, philosophies, and individual lives, Spengler’s Decline qualifies as “one more” concept of the demonic, which further reflects the antinomies and the sense of crisis that always lie behind the demonic. These contradictions were growing during the nineteenth century, while the will to harmonize them was diminishing.34 The popular and to some extent enduring success of Spengler’s work lies not only in its expression of an underlying crisis and the consolations it offers with respect to this crisis—it also shows how the formulae, affects, and questions associated with the demonic in Goethe’s “Urworte” and Poetry and Truth can be simultaneously foundational and destabilizing for (pseudo)theoretical discourses. If, as Blumenberg argues, the demonic marks a limit of theorizability, then it also reflects the theoretical limitations and questionable sources of theoretical power.