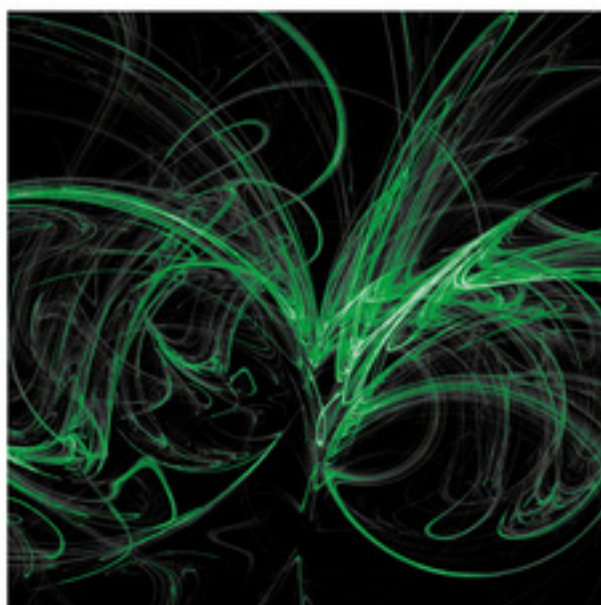


Jerzy Jedlicki

# A Degenerate World



PETER LANG  
EDITION

# Introduction

Ever since I wrote *A Suburb of Europe* (*Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują*) in the 1980s, I have been intrigued by the question of why so many educated and intelligent people would have such a low regard for the innovations that were the work of their contemporaries or even themselves. Or conversely, why on earth would people create such a civilisation in which they feel so bad. One could respond that some people are the builders and makers, while others are simply unhappy and disgusted by nature, and that malcontent and misanthropy are fairly common characteristics among intellectuals, who also happen to be the main source of fare for a historian of thought. That answer doesn't quite satisfy me. There are plenty of intellectuals who have an optimistic view of progress in its various forms. Secondly, in the texts of these angry or bitter accusers of modernity, whether we agree with them or not, one can find many acute and prescient judgements which demand that the historian pay closer attention.

I had intended to follow up my earlier book with a continuation encompassing the years 1890–1914, looking into the Polish intelligentsia's attitudes towards the modernist crisis in European culture. This endeavour would require me to differentiate what was purely Polish from what were merely adoptions of Western intellectual positions towards the innovations in technology, customs, philosophy, and the arts.

The Polish disputes regarding modernity are coloured by Poland's geographical and political position in Europe relative to the main centres of European culture, as well as by the axiom of the defence of native culture. In Poland and similarly situated countries of Europe (politically, economically, and culturally), one finds that the criticisms of modernity are shaped by attitudes towards what is foreign or alien, as well as by attitudes towards the West in general and towards its cities. Hoping to eliminate these factors, for the sake of comparison, it seemed only fitting to look into how the issue was portrayed in the main centres of Europe. This explains my interest in England, unquestionably the most advanced country in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Entering these new grounds, I had to tread slowly and carefully. The amount and richness of sources and writings on the topic in the English, as well as in the French and American sources, was impressive, if not staggering, and it soon became obvious that there were several trends in the criticisms of the emerging industrial civilisation, starting at least with the English Romanticists. For every work I read, five new index cards would appear in my bibliographical catalogue.

Clearly, this was getting a bit out of hand. What had been intended to be a comparative excursion of one or two chapters had become the main body of the work.

The reader will find some of the author's comparative intentions in two earlier written texts which I have included: "Gloomy Stereotypes of the West" and "City on Trial" (Chapters 2 and 3). Both of these chapters saw their beginnings in papers at academic conferences.

In 1994–1995, for a joint gathering of humanists and scientists in Jabłonna under the auspices of the Polish Academy of Sciences on the topic of "The Dilemmas of Modern Civilization and Human Nature," I ventured to write a comprehensive, yet concise, text entitled "The Historical Pedigree of the Idea of a Crisis in European Civilisation." It was published in a collection of materials from that gathering (Janusz Reykowski and Tadeusz Bieliński, eds.), as well as in the Polish periodical *Znak* under the title – "Three Centuries of Desperation" (1996, no. 1). As the scope of this text is somewhat broader and serves as an outline of the topic, I have included "Three Centuries of Desperation" (with some minor additions) as an introductory, first chapter to this book, although it neither exhausts the topic nor leads to definitive conclusions. The original text sparked lively debates in Jabłonna, at a meeting at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and in the periodical *Znak*, raising some interesting issues which I have included as a *Postscript* to the chapter.

The historical manifestations of the idea of a crisis of civilisation in post-Enlightenment Europe are so many and diverse that bringing them together would be an enterprise beyond the capabilities of a single author. In the literature known to me, I have found only one serious work of this sort, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, by the American historian Arthur Herman. While I hold this work in high esteem, it is obvious that in a work of such scope choices must be made, and this work had little information on the catastrophists of Victorian and Edwardian England, to whom the fourth chapter of this book is dedicated. "Degeneration, the English Way" appeared for the first time in the Polish edition of this book.

While German philosophy – from Schopenhauer to Heidegger – was certainly a rich source of civilisational pessimism, I lack the linguistic and scholarly competencies, and perhaps, the enthusiasm, necessary to tackle the topic. While I take heart that much has been written and translated here in Poland on the topic, the same cannot be said of the perhaps less profound, but not at all less critical English writings on modern civilisation. That is one of the reasons the chapter on

English “degeneration” takes a more panoramic approach, rather than focusing on individual authors.

The choice of authors and texts is without doubt subjective – how could it be otherwise? I have tried to base my choices on their influence and popularity during their own times, as that would provide a more accurate picture of the mental and emotional climate of the era. It was of less interest to me that the 20<sup>th</sup> century would see the entire deck reshuffled with some of these earlier authors relegated to oblivion even in their own countries, their names known only to historians. Presenting their opinions on the era and Europe’s future, at least in abbreviated form, I have tried to keep our knowledge of what was to come in the next century out of the picture – or at least not to let it intrude too conspicuously. The reader knows for him or herself what some of the ideological concepts were to lead to in the not too distant future.

There is one thing of which I am certain and feel compelled to include in this introduction – that, namely, the division of historical optimists and pessimists, so amusingly and equally ridiculed in the excerpts about the two heroes from Flaubert’s satire, does not separate the wheat from the chaff, whatever might be represented as the “wheat.” There were some thinkers amongst both groups who rejected any and all arguments that might weaken their belief, be it in global progress or catastrophe. Ideas that would prove dangerous to humanity stemmed from both sides of the debate. Yet both sides, albeit rather in their moderate than extreme variants, offered insightful and ethically mature diagnoses of their times and made predictions that were not entirely misguided.

Has this subject essentially changed? A little more than a century has passed since the times described in this book, and it has been a century that was immensely replete with events and catastrophes. The civilisational landscape of Europe today is completely different than it was in 1914. Yet, when one reads contemporary opinions about modernity, it is easy to get the impression that this is but a continuation of the dispute, with similar arguments colliding with one another. Neither side relents, neither in their accusations nor in their defence, and sometimes both are even expressed in the writings of the same author. This civilisation of ours is ambivalent by nature. It is unsurpassed in its creditable progress in knowledge and discovery and for the development of technological and economical might but pitifully helpless in its efforts to contain the aggressive inclinations of its inhabitants and to alleviate the abject human misery and despair so prevalent on this planet.

I would like to thank all those who took part in the many discussions during the preparation of this book, especially those regarding the essay “Three

Centuries of Desperation.” Among them, I would first like to mention the late professors Stefan Amsterdamski and Barbara Skarga. Thanks are due also to Tadeusz Bielicki, Ewa Bieńkowska, Maciej Janowski, Daniel Grinberg, and Janusz Reykowski for their comments and, especially, their criticisms.

I was able to conduct the research and study necessary for this book (and for a few others, yet unwritten) at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. during 1989–1990, and later, in May of 1997, thanks to a grant from the British Academy in London. Above all, however, I was able to make constant use of the privileges offered by my home institution – the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Besides, Dr. Aleksander Łupienko from the Institute performed the enormous and thankless task of verifying and, where necessary, correcting the book’s many citations and bibliographical references. Elena Rozbicka did her best to polish up the English translation of the text. For whatever errors remain in spite of this, the author claims sole responsibility.

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