

The symbolic nature of the entities of physics is generally recognised; and the scheme of physics is now formulated in such a way as to make it almost self-evident that it is a partial aspect of something wider.

Sir Arthur Eddington, THE NATURE OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD

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Age of Anxiety

*I*N a striking essay written in 1919, one of France's literary lights called attention to a crisis that had overtaken the European mind in the twentieth century. Hamlet-like, Paul Valéry brooded on the greatness and decline of Europe, a subject to which he returned again and again until his death in 1945. The greatness was not in doubt. Valéry marvelled at the imbalance of political and intellectual power between Europe and the rest of the world up to the present. Small though it was in size, in reality only a little promontory on the great continent of Asia, Europe had led the world in thought and culture for centuries. Europe was "the elect portion of the terrestrial globe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a vast body." Europe's superiority rested on a happy combination of qualities—imagination and rigorous logic, skepticism and mysticism, above all an ardent and disinterested curiosity. "Everything came to Europe, and everything came from it. Or almost everything."¹

"—until recently," said Valéry. The Great War had made him ponder deeply the fragility of civilizations, that of Europe as well as Nineveh, Babylon, and Persepolis. "We later civilizations . . . we too now know that we are mortal."² In fact, however, Europe's mortality, or at least decline, had begun, as Valéry now saw, long before World War I. Already by 1914 Europe had perhaps reached the limits of "modernism," which was characterized above all, Valéry thought, by disorder in the mind. By disorder he appears to have meant the lack of any fixed system of reference for living and thinking. This lack could be ascribed to "the free coexistence, in all her cultivated minds, of the most dissimilar ideas, the most contradictory principles of life and

¹ Paul Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind," *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (New York, 1962), pp. 31-3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

learning. This is characteristic of a *modern* epoch."³ The decline also owed much to politics, which had never been Europe's strong suit, a weakness for which the continent was now being punished. The export of European knowledge and applied science had enabled others to upset the inequality on which Europe's predominance had been based. For these and other causes Europe and *Homo europaeus* had succumbed at last to *anxiety* and *anguish*. The military crisis might be temporarily over, but the economic crisis remained, as did above all "the crisis of the mind" which was the most subtle cause of all and the most fateful for literature, philosophy, and aesthetics.

Thus Valéry, along with many of his contemporaries, announced the beginning of a new Age of Anxiety in European history. Before pursuing further that anxiety, which Valéry interpreted as a symptom of decline, it would be well for us to cast more than a passing glance at Europe's continuing intellectual greatness in the twentieth century. Despite his pessimism Valéry would have been the first to say that the greatness persisted, though not without signs of diminishment, through most of his lifetime. It is true that twentieth-century Europe lived to a large extent on the accumulated intellectual capital of past centuries. Some of its chief luminaries in science and philosophy, for example, were born and educated in the nineteenth century and did some of their most important work before 1914: Sigmund Freud (b. 1856), Max Planck (b. 1858), Alfred North Whitehead (b. 1861), Carl Jung (b. 1875), and Albert Einstein (b. 1879). It is also true that a serious brain drain to America and elsewhere began to set in with the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, it cannot be gainsaid that there were major breakthroughs in at least three major areas of thought between 1900 and 1950: physical science, psychology, and philosophy.

The new quantum and relativity physics, said to constitute a "twin-revolution in the realms of the infinitely large and the infinitely small,"⁴ was comparable in its richness of new ideas to "classical" physics. It in fact upset some of the major presuppositions of the older physics. Because it could not be as readily pictured as the Newtonian world-machine, it was not equally accessible to the lay mind and did not have the same profound effect on the "other culture" of the humanities. Indeed, it reached the humanities chiefly in a roundabout way, by means of the awesome technology it made possible. In philosophical circles, however, it did certainly give rise to much new speculation about the nature and structure of matter, space and time, causation and predictability, the problem of knowledge, and even God. Between the materialistic science of the communists (as stated by Lenin in *Materialism*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴ Arthur Koestler, *Arrow in the Blue* (New York, 1952).

and *Empirio-Criticism*, 1909) and the "idealistic" philosophy of science that now emerged in western Europe a great gulf was fixed.

Existentialism and psychoanalysis also constituted major breakthroughs. Both had roots in the nineteenth century, as indeed did the new physics. But both flourished in twentieth-century soil because the climate—that of anxiety—was right. Both, moreover, because they pertained centrally to man rather than to electrons and wave lengths, quickly and deeply permeated the culture around them. Existentialism, called "the philosophy of the twentieth century," spilled over into literature and the drama. So did psychoanalysis, described by Thomas Mann as a "world movement," affecting every domain of the intellect, not only literature but also prehistory, mythology, folklore, religion, and pedagogy. "Indeed, it would be too much to say that I came to psychoanalysis. It came to me,"⁵ said this major novelist of the twentieth century.

It was existentialism's special distinction to provide philosophy with a new starting point for thinking, sharply different from the "objective" thinking characteristic of "modern" philosophy. True philosophy, according to such philosophers as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, was the fruit of personal rather than impersonal thinking, of the thinker's involvement in a life-situation, and of caring deeply about that situation, rather than of the detached observation and logic so cherished by Idealism or scientific Positivism. The distinction of psychoanalysis was similarly to probe beneath abstract "reason" or the "ego" to find the emotional springs of thought and action. If psychoanalysis did not discover the unconscious, it did explore it thoroughly, especially in the systems of Freud and Carl Jung. Otto Rank, who was one of Freud's circle, rightly called the twentieth century the "age of psychology." For never before had psychology, now completely independent of philosophy, been so central to Europe's intellectual endeavor. Psychoanalysis, it should be noted, was but one of many contemporary schools of psychology. In addition to Freudians there were also Jungians, Adlerians, and behaviorists, to name only the best known. There was even a school of existential psychology led by the Swiss psychologist Ludwig Binswanger, correspondent and antagonist of Freud.

Nor does this list of three—physics, existentialism, and psychoanalysis—by any means exhaust the intellectual achievements of Europe between the two world wars. It would not be difficult to draw up a much longer list including logical positivism, still another creative movement in philosophy; Keynesian economics; all the new movements, some

⁵ Thomas Mann, "Freud and the Future" (1936). Reprinted in Mann, *Essays of Three Decades* (New York, 1947).

highly experimental, in literature and art (especially the metaphysical novel and metaphysical poetry); and the new theologies, some of which, like "neoorthodoxy," did indeed recall older theologies, but others of which projected radically new points of view. The documents collected in this section record some of these "adventures of ideas."

Along with the greatness, however, went the decline or anxiety, as Valéry said. Not outsiders but Europeans themselves invented the term Age of Anxiety to describe what they thought was happening to them in the twentieth century. They themselves dwelt increasingly not on the growing enlightenment of their times, as so many had done in the eighteenth century, nor on Europe's continuing greatness, but on the anxiety they felt about their existence, their culture, and their destiny. "Today," said the theologian-philosopher Paul Tillich at midcentury, "it has become almost a truism to call our time an 'age of anxiety.'"⁶ Tillich believed that anxiety infected even the greatest achievement of contemporary Europeans in literature, art, and philosophy. Europe, by his account, had entered its third great period of anxiety, comparable in intensity to that of the ancient world and the Reformation.

The special form of anxiety that Tillich perceived in twentieth-century Europe was the anxiety of meaninglessness. He traced it to the modern world's loss of a spiritual center which could provide answers to the question of the meaning of life. This was a common observation among those who still belonged to an identifiable religious group. Witness, for example, the early poetry of T. S. Eliot, especially "The Hollow Men" (1925), and the later poetry of W. H. Auden after he had recovered his religious belief. Auden was obsessed by the anxiety felt by the "lonelies" or sick souls of the modern world. In *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) he equated it with the suffering that comes from living without purpose or faith. His four characters, huddling together for warmth, go in search of The Quiet Kingdom, impelled by "a feeling of having lost their bearings, of a restless urge to find water." This sort of observation was not, however, peculiar to religious thinkers. The atheistic existentialists also related anxiety to man's consciousness of living in an "absurd" world. Unlike Tillich, they did not believe there were any essences decreed by God. But the knowledge that there were none caused anxiety because the responsibility for making whatever values there were devolved entirely on man. Man was free—free to choose without reference to God or an ideal world of essences—but his freedom was a "dread" freedom, involving crushing responsibility and the eternal threat of non-being.

The death of God was not the only observed cause of anxiety. Also

⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven, 1952). Note that Tillich's remark applied to America as well as Europe.

cited frequently were the death of man and the death of Europe; in fact, the death—or at least the toppling—of all the great modern idols: not only God and man, but also reason, science, progress, and history. Dire external events from 1914 to 1945 obviously had much to do with this fall of the idols, and consequently with anxiety. However, it is interesting to note that contemporary writers frequently used the fall and the anxiety to explain the events. Tillich did so, for example, in his explanation of the success of fascism. In a time of "total doubt" men escaped from freedom to an authority that promised meaning and imposed answers.⁷ "Twentieth-century man," Arthur Koestler wrote shortly after World War II, "is a political neurotic because he has no answer to the question of the meaning of life, because socially and metaphysically he does not know where he belongs."⁸ Anxiety, then, was thought to be generated, internally as well as externally, by that "crisis of the mind" that Valéry had detected in 1919 but that had been brewing for decades.

The fall of the idols requires further comment. It is paradoxical that science became an object of distrust and fear in a great age of science. This was because to many people science, once regarded as a cure-all, had come to signify machines, and machines now spelled impersonality, dehumanization, and the ability to wage total war. The new feeling about machines, still glorified by the Italian Futurists in the early part of the century, is recorded vividly in such books as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1933) and Virgil Gheorghiu's *The Twenty-fifth Hour* (1949). In the latter the machines created by science revolt against their human masters and enslave them. Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), a book with a similar theme, had a happier ending: men regained control over the machines. If science could not come to the relief of man's estate, at least not in the way Bacon had believed, neither could it provide an acceptable interpretation of the universe or found a morality. It was certainly no substitute for the religion that so many Europeans had lost.

Nor was man any longer a pillar of strength. André Malraux may have been the first to talk about "the death of man." In one of Malraux's early works of fiction an Asian writes to a European friend: "For you [Europeans] absolute reality was first God, then Man; but [now] Man [too] is dead, following God, and you search with anguish for something to which you can entrust his strange heritage."⁹ What Malraux meant was that the "classical" image of rational man was dead or dying.

⁷ Doubtless, Tillich borrowed the expression "escape from freedom" from Erich Fromm's famous book of 1941 by that title.

⁸ Arthur Koestler, "A Guide to Political Neuroses," *The Trail of the Dinosaur* (New York, 1955), pp. 229–30.

⁹ André Malraux, *La tentation de l'Occident* (Paris, 1926), letter no. 15.

But long before Malraux the Freudians had been saying that man was less rational than he knew, that he was suffering from neurosis, and that he was not master even in his own house, the psyche. Other images, equally unflattering to human self-esteem, emerged more or less simultaneously: sinful man, "the man without qualities," "the stranger," "the unnameable," etc.¹⁰ Existential man could be either pathetic, subject to nausea (as in Sartre's early novel by that title), or heroic, defiant of gods and tyrants. But even when defiant—and successful—like Aegisthus in Sartre's later wartime play *The Flies*, he was still afflicted by cosmic anxiety. All of these and similar images surfaced in literature, and indeed changed the nature of literature. Because the "modern" picture of human nature was disintegrating, it became difficult to write novels and plays with old-fashioned heroes or even ordinary people with firm personality traits.

This skepticism extended to history, another erstwhile idol. The communists and fascists continued to have faith in history. This was one of the advantages they had over their rivals: they knew where history was taking them or where they were taking history, whereas "bourgeois" liberals discussed seriously the "decline of the West." William Inge, "the gloomy Dean" of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, denounced the idea of progress as a "modern superstition." Instead of being progressive, history was perhaps cyclical, or at least liable to shipwreck at any time. In any case, there was no observable end to the great battle between freedom and destiny in history. Oswald Spengler, whose famous book on the "going under" of the West was published immediately after World War I, believed in destiny. Nothing could stop or delay the inexorable turning of a society from "culture" to "civilization," that is, from its phase of spiritual creativity to that of soullessness and materialism, and on to its eventual demise. Arnold Toynbee, less deterministic, thought that civilizations (he did not use the word pejoratively, as did Spengler) could always rally; still, it was a fact that twenty-five of the twenty-six great civilizations of the world had disappeared, and that the twenty-sixth, that of the West, had already entered its "time of troubles." Malraux, opposing Spengler, insisted on freedom in history, particularly through man's artistic creativity. Yet he too had a healthy respect for destiny, which he defined as the feeling man develops at certain times in history of not being in control, of not having goals; and he thought that destiny so defined had enlarged its empire in recent times. The representativeness of Valéry's plaint of 1915—that "we later civilizations . . . we too know

¹⁰ I have written at length about these images in the chapter entitled "Problematic Man" in my *Modern European Thought* (New York, 1977).

that we are mortal"—becomes apparent when we read these and similar statements by his contemporaries.

Whither Europe in particular? The idol of Europe fell along with the idol of history. Valéry, despite his many essays on Europe's greatness, ended by harping more on its decline. Others like Spengler contemplated the permanent decline of Europe. Malraux thought that "the death of Europe" was premature. Who could match, even now after two world wars, Europe's "will to discovery and awareness," her great art, science, and literature? All, however, whatever their individual prognosis, agreed that henceforth Europe's intellectual and cultural achievements must be gauged in relation to what was being done elsewhere, in America or Asia. This may not seem an especially original insight. The point is that it was new for Europeans who, as Geoffrey Barraclough said, had been contemplating their navels for a long time. Henceforth, history must be written from a world viewpoint. European history and even Western history must not be studied in isolation. This was one of the points Spengler insisted on. He urged the replacement of a "Ptolemaic" by a "Copernican" viewpoint in history. His Copernican revolution consisted in treating Europe as one of a number of great cultures of world history, and not as the center of the historical universe around which all other cultures orbited.

But what of the larger question: upon what do all great cultures depend? How much does intellectual leadership depend on preponderant political and economic power? If it in fact does not depend on this power, Europe might continue to be, if not the sun of the world's intellectual universe, at least one of the most important planets—as I believe Europe has been since 1950, and will continue to be. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead had some wise things to say on this subject.¹¹ A "live" and "high" civilization, he thought, was contingent upon a spirit of adventure. The latter was in turn contingent upon the amount of curiosity and self-criticism a society could generate, and upon explicit recognition of the need for free speculation, because all reasonably coherent points of view contribute to man's understanding of the universe. But such a society must also have "some transcendent aim," for lack of which people wallow in pleasure and corruption. It must have ultimate, even if "impracticable," ideals concerning the Good, the True, and the Beautiful toward which people are agreed that they should strive. Europe, one might add, was for many centuries the heir of ancient Greece in all these respects. After the "civil wars" from 1914 to 1945, the freedom, the self-criticism, and even much of the curiosity remain, though in a truncated Europe. But

¹¹ See especially Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* (New York, 1933).

is Europe still a particularly adventurous civilization now that it has been put on the defensive like late imperial Rome and is no longer an expanding world power? Above all, can Europeans ever recover the transcendent aims they once had? The answer to these questions is not determined or presently determinable. Surely the answer will be supplied in large measure not merely by a hypothetical shift in the political and economic balance of nations, but by the goals and ideals that Europeans set for themselves in the years to come.

Readings

1. *On the Meaning of the Twentieth Century*

PAUL TILLICH: *Age of Anxiety* *

The following three selections register the grave concern of a theologian (Paul Tillich), a psychiatrist (Franz Alexander), and a philosopher (C. E. M. Joad) about recent developments in western thought and culture. Paul Tillich (1886-1965), one of the most impressive and influential Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, came to the U. S. A. in 1933 after having held academic posts at four German universities. *The Courage To Be*, from which the following excerpts are taken, grew out of the Terry Lectures delivered at Yale University.

. . . SOCIOLOGICAL analyses of the present period have pointed to the importance of anxiety as a group phenomenon. Literature and art have made anxiety a main theme of their creations, in content as well as in style. The effect of this has been the awakening of at least the educated groups to an awareness of their own anxiety, and a permeation of the public consciousness by ideas and symbols of anxiety. Today it has become almost a truism to call our time an "age of anxiety." This holds equally for America and Europe. . . .

. . . I suggest that we distinguish three types of anxiety according to the three directions in which nonbeing threatens being. Nonbeing threatens man's ontic self-affirmation, relatively in terms of fate, absolutely in terms of death. It threatens man's spiritual self-affirmation, relatively in terms of emptiness, absolutely in terms of meaninglessness. It threatens man's moral self-affirmation, relatively in terms of guilt, absolutely in terms of condemnation. The awareness of this threefold threat is anxiety appearing in three forms, that of fate and death (briefly, the anxiety of death), that of emptiness and loss of meaning (briefly, the

* From Paul Tillich: *The Courage To Be*, pp. 35, 41, 47, 57, 61-3. Copyright 1952 by Yale University Press. Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press.