Chapter 25

The Magic Mountain

The Development of Science from the Nineteenth Century

> "Pin your faith to the seed of nature, stumble through the darkness of the blind; pin your faith to the shapes of nature, stumble through a darkness deeper still."[1]

AT THE HEART OF THE Florentine Renaissance lay the truth that Man is a spirit - "I seek myself, who am indeed pure spirit"[2] - and from that truth sprang the creative energy that moved the great artists and scientists, scholars and explorers

German-born theoretical physicist Albert Einstein in 1905

whose work formed the modern world. As always, however, time eroded the initial certainty, and gradually doubt and forgetting combined to lead to a belief in the exclusive reality of matter and a denial of the spirituality of Man. As early as the seventeenth century the Italian, Pierre Gassendi, and the Englishman, Thomas Hobbes, had formulated materialist doctrines. By the eighteenth century, French thinkers like Julien de La Mettrie and Paul, baron d'Holbach, had developed the materialist aspects of Descartes dualism; and the Romanticism that stemmed from Jean-Jacques Rousseau hastened the process by making the feelings, rather than the reason, of Man the criterion of judgment. The advent of Romanticism in literature and music, which swept away many of the rational and classical values of the eighteenth century, co-incided with the great political and social upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars to produce in the early nineteenth century a new European. sensibility directed towards the body and its needs, towards desires and the material world which appeared to satisfy them. The Industrial Revolution was both a cause and a symptom of this movement. The iron bridge of Coalbrookdale - for all its elegance - exhibited what had entered the souls of men.

Materialism gathered pace as the nineteenth century proceeded. The Renaissance had taught its disciples to look outwards and to discover the natural laws that govern the created world. Hence science slowly became the human activity in the forefront of progress. Here, too, the growth of knowledge was limited by a forgetting of the first, universal principles laid down by the Florentine Academy. The totality of human experience became reduced by such directives as that of Galileo to ignore the "subjective" senses of hearing, taste and smell in favour of the "objective" senses of touch and sight, which most easily measure the world extended in space and time. Though Newton knew better, lesser scientists followed John Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, to the exclusion of the latter from scientific investigation. It was a short step from the inaudible, tasteless, odourless world of "measurable" things to the materialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The "mind-forged manacles" that William Blake bewailed as he observed the miserable streets of London were manufactured, as he well knew, by the denial of spirit.

Three thinkers especially dominated European thought in the century after the battle of Waterloo. Each was influenced strongly by the prevailing movement towards materialism, and each, in radically different ways, hastened that movement onwards towards its apotheosis in the twentieth century. All three brought what was seen as scientific methods of investigation, using carefully recorded facts of sense perception and measurement, to the study of humanity itself. They were the English biologist, Charles Darwin, the German political scientist and economist, Karl Marx, and the Austrian psychologist, Sigmund Freud.

Darwin profoundly affected western man's view of his own nature when he published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, for he ascribed a place to men alongside all animals and organic life in a mechanical process of evolution:

> "Owing to this struggle (for life), variations, however slight, and from whatever cause proceeding, if they be in any degree profitable to the individuals of a species, in their infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to their physical conditions of life, will tend to the preservation of such individuals,

> and will generally be inherited by the offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving, for, of the many individuals of any species which are periodically born, but a small number can survive. I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term Natural Selection ..."[3]

Such a theory directly cut across traditional accounts of creation, notably that in "Genesis", but more significantly it struck at the principle that Man was of a quite different order from other forms of organic life. It assumed that the reason, power of speech and self-consciousness that so distinguish Man from brute life could be explained as evolving by the same process that seems to determine the evolution of woodpeckers and mistletoe. It is significant that Darwin himself explicitly rejected principles as a starting point in his scientific method:

> "I must begin with a good body of facts, and not from principle, in which I always suspect some fallacy".[4]

The extension of the theory of natural selection to social life by Herbert Spencer, in the form of the idea of the survival of the fittest, gave birth to theories in social science and to political maxims which at their crudest entered into later racialist and fascist ideologies. At the same time Darwinism gave a powerful impetus to the belief that human life progresses from an original state of primitive materiality to a final state of civilised material perfection.

This later idea of progress formed an important ingredient in the philosophical outlook of Karl Marx. After an early interest in German idealism, Marx turned Hegel and Feuerbach upside down and developed a theory in which the material base of society determines economic relations, political structure, ideology and consciousness itself. Class divisions, defined in terms of the relationship of individuals to the productive system, become crucial within history, which is no more than the working out of class struggles for control of productive power. Thus by a dialectical process the original thesis of men enslaved by nature gives way to the antithesis of men enslaved by one another and, finally, to a synthesis of men free from the domination of either nature or their fellows, to a communist society in which the state has "withered away". The productive method has simultaneously grown from primitive hand tools, through eras of capital accumulation and technological advance, to a final state of complete sufficiency. At each critical stage in the class struggle a revolution is required for power over production to be wrested from the existing owners, whether feudal barons or capitalist bourgeoisie. Hence Marx, like some Darwinists, saw a final utopian state of freedom, albeit one in a material world where the "illusions" of spirituality or immortal life are forever dispelled. Consciousness itself is no more than an "epiphenomenon", a reflection of the underlying state of material reality.

Sigmund Freud, a product of imperial Vienna in the period which also saw in the Austrian capital such thinkers as the physicist, Erwin Schrodinger, the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Adolf Hitler, made bold claims for science as he understood it:

> "(that) there is no other source of knowledge of the universe but the intellectual manipulation of carefully verified observations, in fact, what is called research,

> and that no knowledge can be obtained from revelation, intuition or inspiration".[5]

Freud's virtual creation of the science of psychoanalysis extended the field of such observations into the area of the unconscious, distinguished from the pre-conscious by the degree of difficulty in the recall of repressed material from the mind. The central concept of repression, used to describe the retention in the unconscious of memories of painful experiences, mainly from childhood and of a sexual character, proved to be therapeutically useful, but Freud himself recognised that his system dealt with the abnormal and did not extend far into the area of normal experience. This limitation be acknowledged; yet he dismissed any interest in investigating consciousness itself:

> "What is meant by 'conscious', we need not discuss; it is beyond all doubt".[6]

The dominant ideas of Darwin, Marx and Freud and their followers precluded any serious interest in consciousness as a practical concept. For Darwin, men were elements in statistically vast populations extending through great lengths of time and evolving under laws that govern all organic material. The miraculous presence in each individual man of that inner awareness that so appealed to Immanuel Kant as a source of wonder passed Darwin by. So too, Karl Marx, obsessed with the economic exploitation of man by man and the struggle between the possessors of property and the proletariat, which he seemed to see all around him in the industrial areas of western Europe, had no time for the immediacy of the present moment, or for the love that transcends all economic relations. For him, the world was essentially material, even if dialectically so. For Freud, Man was governed by forces within himself, but outside his conscious control. An unconscious force, the sexual drive, largely governed his behaviour, and any attempt to deny this was seen as itself a form of repression. It is significant that Freud's psychoanalytic method required the patient to avoid actually looking directly at the analyst, as though any immediate connection was liable to awaken something - consciousness, perhaps - seen as harmful to the discovery of the truth!

The physical sciences in the nineteenth century were subject to a similar growth of materialist assumptions, exhibited in an increasing concentration upon matter as the stuff of which everything is made, and in a ruthless emphasis upon the sense data of touch and sight as the only measurable phenomena. Physics became the central subject of modern science and the paradigm of scientific method. Enquiry moved away from the open yet penetrating question, "What is it?" towards the narrower and ultimately stultifying question, "What is it made of?" Not surprisingly the answer developed into a never-ending search for ever more elusive particles, until in the twentieth century the Italian physicist, Enrico Fermi, commented, "If I could remember the names of all these particles I'd be a botanist".

Isaac Newton himself had speculated about the atomic theory postulated in the ancient world by such philosophers as Democritus and Lucretius. In the early nineteenth century this was developed by the British scientist, John Dalton, using the work of Boyle and Lavoisier, and by 1869 the Russian chemist, Mendeleyev, was able to establish a comprehensive periodic table of elements, which "if arranged according to their atomic weights, show a distinct periodicity of their properties". It raised the question of what lay behind the pattern of atomic weights.

A few years earlier, in 1865, James Clerk Maxwell brought together the discoveries of Michael Faraday and other physicists in a theory which unified the laws of electricity and magnetism, and showed that electro-magnetic waves exhibit the inverse square law of force as they are propagated from a source. Moreover, he came to the conclusion that light itself was an electromagnetic wave. Since atoms emitted light, Clerk Maxwell's theory could be related to the nature of atoms and to the question raised by the periodic table.

Meanwhile, German physicists had found that spectral lines in light emitted from elements gave precise information about each element, suggesting that the way in which the light was generated was closely related to Mendeleyev's pattern of atomic weights i.e. that the atom of each element had its own distinctive structure. Clerk Maxwell's equations, however, did not explain spectral lines. It was clear that the idea of the atom as an homogenous particle needed revision, and in 1897 a fundamental step was taken in this direction with the discovery of the electron by J. J. Thomson. Thomson found that cathode rays were, in fact, negatively charged particles with a mass of less than one thousandth of that of an atom of hydrogen (the lightest element); their electrical charge was proportionately larger. Thus the electron was the first sub-atomic particle to be discovered. This also indicated that electricity was of a particulate nature. At the same time as Thomson's discoveries, German and French physicists found that radioactivity in uranium also demonstrated that the atom was divisible.

The atom, however, could not be made entirely of electrons. Since they are negatively charged they repel each other, and the force concerned is such that if two pinheads were made wholly of electrons they would repel each other with a force greater than the weight of the earth. In 1911 Lord Rutherford found by experiment that the mass of the atom must be largely concentrated at the centre, in a particle of positive charge and of mass about 1844 times that of an electron. He called this the proton.

The cumulative effect of these discoveries was to throw into confusion the understanding of classical mechanics which had ruled since Newton's time. One reason was that, according to the classical view, any charged particle moving on a curved path emits electromagnetic radiation and hence would lose energy and spiral into the nucleus. Hence the atom would be unstable. A second reason was that it was known by experiment that energy of radiation is not transmitted in continuously variable amounts, but is more intense at certain wavelengths, a result also in conflict with classical mechanics. To eliminate such difficulties a radical departure from the Newtonian system was taken by the German physicist, Max Planck, and the Dane, Niels Bohr. In 1900 Planck suggested that radiation only occurs in quantum amounts of energy i.e. in discrete pockets or *quanta* (Latin "how much?"). A new constant, which he called 'h', related the wave length of the energy to its frequency ($e = hf$). Bohr later made use of Planck's constant by proposing a new 'shell' model of the atom, in which electrons move in series of stable orbits around the nucleus. Each orbit has fixed size and energy. That nearest the centre is completely stable, because electrons cannot jump towards the nucleus. In the outer orbits, electrons can jump either way; if towards the centre, energy is emitted; if towards the circumference, energy is absorbed. The energy change is equal to the difference in energy level between

adjacent orbits. Such a model explained both the stability of atoms and the spectral lines which were evidence of the variable intensity of radiation energy. Thus was quantum mechanics introduced to the world.

The year 1905 had seen, however, the greatest development of all in the transformation of Newtonian mechanics into modern physics, for in that year the German physicist, Albert Einstein, published a paper on the special theory of relativity. In fact, two other papers in the same year by Einstein made fundamental contributions to physics, but special relativity showed that Newton's very conception of space and time needed to be modified. An experiment by two Americans, Michelson and Morley, in 1887 had proved that light travels at a constant speed, whether it is projected in the direction of the earth's movement through space or not. This implied that the ether which Clerk Maxwell had postulated as the medium through which light waves travel might not exist; and that objects observed to move in the same direction as light waves must become shorter in that direction if the observer is himself at rest in relation to them.

Einstein claimed that his theory was not put forward as a response to the Michelson-Morley experiment, but nevertheless it served to answer fully the problems created for physicists by it. For the special theory made the bold step of asserting that space and time are not absolute invariants, as Newton assumed, but are variant with respect to the movement of observers. Central to the theory was the concept of simultaneity, defined by Einstein as follows:

> "Two events taking place at the points A and B of the system K are simultaneous if they appear at the same instant when observed from the middle point M, of the interval AB."[7]

By a "system K", Einstein meant a co-ordinate reference system made up of rigid rods and within which observers would not move in relation to one another. This definition of simultaneity meant that the time taken by light to reach an observer from an event would be allowed for in deciding when the event occurred. The principle that Einstein then put forward was that space and time were to be treated as variant, whilst the speed of light was held to be invariant or absolute, and yet the laws of nature were to remain as universally true independently of which observer recorded their operation i.e. of whether the observer was in the system K or a different system moving in relation to it. What was implied, therefore, was that spatial and temporal measurements would vary according to the observer, and hence, of course, the relative velocities of moving objects also. This was entirely in accordance with the idea that objects shorten in the direction of their movement, as found by the Michelson-Morley experiment. Similarly, clocks being moved within one reference system would appear to record a slower time than that measured by a clock in a different reference system.

The special theory explained another puzzling fact observed experimentally, namely that particles travelling very fast require a greater force to bend their path than those going slower, i.e. their mass seemed to increase. Einstein's equations for

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** According to the equation:

$$\frac{\text{Mass at rest}}{\text{Mass in movement}} = \sqrt{1-\frac{v^2}{c^2}}$$

where v = velocity of particle, and c = speed of light

transforming space-time and velocity references from one system into another moving relatively to it could be used to prove that mass does, in fact, increase with velocity.**

This implied that at low velocities there is virtually no change of mass, and at velocities approaching the speed of light mass tends towards infinity. A crucial conclusion emerged from this equation: that since kinetic energy is a function of mass and velocity, and that both of these are variable, energy may be taken as interchangeable with mass, according to Einstein's equation, $E=mc^2$. Newton had taken mass and energy to be of different orders, each indestructible; Einstein showed that they were two aspects of one phenomenon.

For eleven years after the publication of the special theory of relativity Einstein continued to work ardently on a greater generalisation of his theory, for he realised that it only dealt with linear motion and did not explain gravitation, which required treatment of objects accelerating in a gravitational field. In 1916 he published the general theory of relativity, a work comparable in scope only with Newton's *Principia*. Using a non-Euclidean system of geometry developed by the German mathematician, Riemann, the theorems of which are constructed on the surface of a sphere, Einstein explained how space in regions containing mass (e.g. in the solar system) has characteristics which are non-Euclidean. For example, just as the shortest distance between two points on the earth's surface is along a great circle, so the shortest distance between two points within the same gravitational field is a geodesic, a line in space-time which is a curve maximising the time between two events. Hence the revolution of the earth around the sun is not caused by a gravitational force, but is the natural movement of an object under no force, but within a space-time where mass, i.e. the sun, is present. The general theory depended crucially on what Einstein called the principle of equivalence: that there is no measurable difference between an object freely falling in a gravitational field and an object moving under the law of inertia i.e. with no force acting on it.

Experimental evidence confirmed Einstein's theories. British astronomers in 1919 observed an eclipse of the sun in the Gulf of Guinea which showed, as Einstein had predicted, that the sun's rays bend in the earth's gravitational field by about twice as much as Newton would have expected. A change in the trajectory of Mercury was also correctly accounted for. Later in the twentieth century, observations in particle accelerators have confirmed the principle of increasing mass at high velocity. Most dramatically, relativity physics led to the understanding of nuclear fission, culminating in the creation of the atomic bomb.

Albert Einstein was, in fact, a man of peace, who hated the growing militarisation of Germany under Bismarck and William II. He sought to avoid it by working in Switzerland, until the achievements of the Prussian Academy of Sciences drew him back there in 1914. Four years later he thought that defeat in the First World War had taught Germany the evils of military aggrandisement, but by 1933, when Hitler came to power, he was disillusioned enough to leave Germany once and for all to settle down to research at Princeton, USA for the remainder of his life. He became a competent player of the violin, an instrument he had always loved. Unable, however, to renounce his desire for peace and his support for the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine, he toured the world, lecturing on both of these, often arriving in distant

places with a violin tucked under his arm. He never ceased, however, to study physics, though failing to satisfy his own demand for a unified view. The supreme irony of his life was the development, with his reluctant support if not participation, of the atomic bomb. In the 1930s he had admitted that re-armament in the face of Nazism was justified. Even when he died in 1955 at the age of 76 he had not forgiven the Germans for their crimes against the Jewish people. In the field of science, he remained childlike:

> "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. It was the experience of mystery - even if mixed with fear - that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms - it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man."[8]

After 1916, the classical conception of space and time as absolute was shattered. So too were the ideas that mass is indestructible and that gravitation is a force. Quantum mechanics, however, demonstrated even more clearly that the general outlook of physics - and common sense - was misleading, for the notion of quanta of energy more or less eliminated the concept of a material object. The Austrian physicist, Erwin Schrodinger, put forward a series of equations, in 1926, which treated electrons as a continuous distribution of electric charge, and thus predicted their density at particular points. This allowed the alternative interpretation that "density" was the probability of an individual electron being at that point. Hence, either the fundamental entities were waves, or there were particles which, in principle, could only be identified by probability statements. The German, Werner Heisenberg, took this further by showing that in so far as the position of a particle could be precisely determined, its velocity could not be, and vice versa. Thus determinate place and velocity of a particle are not ascertainable and, therefore, - at least, for many scientists - not meaningful.

This strange situation has been significantly commented upon by Schrodinger himself, who like Einstein was not indifferent to the moral and cultural implications of his discoveries:

> "The habit of everyday language deceives us and seems to require, whenever we hear the word 'shape' or 'form' pronounced, that it must be the shape or form of something, that a material substratum is required to take on a shape. Scientifically this habit goes back to Aristotle, his *causa materialis* and *causa formalis*. But when you come to the ultimate particles constituting matter, there seems to be no point in thinking of them again as consisting of some material. They are, as it were, pure shape, nothing but shape; what turns up again and again in successive observations is this shape, not an individual speck of material".[9]

Schrodinger may have absorbed the idea from his study of the Upanishads that the world exists as name and form only. A chink of light was entering the dark world of materialism. Whilst Einstein continued to search for a unified field theory which would provide a universal system for all material, electromagnetic and gravitational

phenomena, Schrodinger sought for an ultimate solution in Greek philosophy and the Veda. The difference is well defined in their respective views of what science really is:

> "The object of all science, whether natural science or psychology, is to co-ordinate our experiences and to bring them into a logical system."[10]
>
> "(Natural science's) scope, aim and value is the same as that of any other branch of human knowledge. Nay, none of them alone, only the union of them all, has any scope or value at all, and that is simply enough described: it is to obey the command of the Delphi deity, 'get to know yourself."[11]

The attitude of Schrodinger, a man of wide intellectual interests, who like Einstein was disgusted with the racism of the Nazis in Germany after 1933, suggested that a fresh departure in the physical sciences was in the offing by the mid-twentieth century. Though Einstein emphasised the observer, what he meant by observation was something that could just as well be replaced by a recording mechanism, like a camera. Although space, time and matter were newly defined in relation to an observer, the consciousness of the observer was not a factor in the situation. The concepts (or, Kant would have said, intuitions) of space and time were no longer absolute, but they remained the contents of an experience the experiencer of which was ignored. Even for Heisenberg, who emphasised the intervention that observation necessarily makes in the observed field, the observation was by some form of electromagnetic ray, not by a conscious being. Hence the whole development of relativity theory and quantum mechanics had little contribution to make to what Schrodinger recognised as the aim of all science: self-knowledge. In this sense modern science, both physical and human, has followed the path laid down for it by those scientists, like Kepler and Harvey, who had forgotten the two principles that Marsilio Ficino had stated: that the world was the living body of a world soul, and that it was a harmonic unity. The greatest modern scientists may have glimpsed the underlying harmony of the universe; few indeed have recognised like Schrodinger that it is contained in a world-soul, in which there is no ultimate separation of the observer, consciousness, from what is observed.

> "It (science) gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity … Science is reticent too when it is a question of the great Unity - the One of Parmenides - of which we all somehow form part, to which we belong."[12]

Perhaps more than any other man of his time the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, represented the dichotomy that had arisen between a strictly theoretical outlook on the world, as exemplified by modern science, and the practical and intuitive outlook, which acknowledged a conscious observer. After school in Vienna, Wittgenstein studied in Berlin and then became a gifted student of aeronautical engineering in Manchester. An interest in mathematical problems led him to Cambridge, where Bertrand Russell was working on the logical solution to problems of language and knowledge, and increasingly Wittegenstein turned to the more creative side of his

nature, reflected in his fine ability as a musician and architect. He always remained what Schopenhauer called someone for whom philosophical problems were a living experience and not just an academic exercise, which was indicated by his idiosyncratic arguments and impatience with anyone who merely recounted others' ideas. For example, he would ponder the so-called problem of idealism by asking whether, if one looks up at a perfectly blue sky and sees nothing else, the experience is only of "blue", or whether there is anything else experienced, such as sense data. As for the experiencer, he would ask what it means to point to oneself and say that "only I have this experience". The problem of self identity was, indeed, at the centre of his enquiries. What does it mean to say that this is "my consciousness"? Is there an owner of consciousness at all? Perhaps there is no owner? Thus did he speculate.

From such probings, Wittgenstein hit upon the strange question of whether there can be a private language, for he saw that if the individual is indeed a unique element of consciousness he must be able, in some sense, to have a totally private experience about which he could speak to himself, or at least use words in an intelligible way. Such a language would not be one which, as a matter of fact, could not be used for communication with others (e.g. simply because translation rules into another's language had not been made) but which in principle was uncommunicable to others. Suppose, said Wittgenstein, the "private" person made a mark S, which meant for him alone some inner sensation, and then later on, having the same sensation, wrote down S once more. Then that would be an element in such a private language, for only he could ever really know what S means. Not so, argued Wittgenstein, for the use of any language depends upon there being rules for the use of words (or marks). The only "rule" for the use of S is that the man thinks that the same sensation has recurred. How does he know it has? There is no difference between his thinking it is the same, and it actually being the same; hence there is no correct or incorrect use. Whatever he chooses to call correct is correct. No language can operate in this way.

Wittgenstein's conclusion was that not only does the concept of a private language break down, but that the whole idea of totally private experience breaks down also. Nothing, however, intimately 'mine', can really be, in principle, inaccessible to others, for if I can speak of it (correctly or incorrectly) then others can understand me and know what I experience.

By such arguments Ludwig Wittgenstein groped with the central problem of the scientific age, failure to remember consciousness as the universal observer. Since the Florentine Renaissance had awoken western Man to the pivotal place of self awareness in all experience and to the existence of a world-soul in which all creatures participate, there had been a gradual forgetting. As Ficino wrote, "it is through myself alone that I apprehend what I can apprehend".[13] Wittgenstein confronted this vital issue upon which all others depended: "Who am I? What is the self?" He did not find an answer which satisfied him, except perhaps when he died. For after a difficult life, full of disruption caused by war, personal antipathies and a painful last illness, he said on his deathbed, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life!"

That Wittgenstein was Viennese was ironic. Out of German-speaking central Europe in the century after 1850 came many of the most prolific ideas of the western world, including those of several physical scientists - notably Einstein, Planck, Schrodinger and Heisenberg - Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, the logical

positivists of Vienna, and Wittgenstein himself. What characterised that world of *mittel-Europa* was a dynamic energy, both physical and intellectual, not fully tempered by the civilising influences of classical Europe - of the Graeco-Roman world, of the twelfth-century Christian renaissance in France, of the humanism that spread from *quattrocento* Florence. Germany was marginally placed in terms of the great generative ideas of western civilisation, which stemmed from the principle *"Know Thyself"*. The Copernican "revolution" had not altered the philosophical truth that Man stands at the centre of creation and is indeed the measure of all things. Through Man consciousness is focused in the world. Without Man the world - if it exists at all - is a barren and meaningless wilderness. As German ideas, with their incomplete insight into nature and human life, spread throughout the scientific world and beyond, so did Germany develop as an overtly unified, but narrowly authoritarian society, economically productive, militarily strong, but flawed by a lack of humanity which would open the door to terrible ideas of racism in the twentieth century. There were many good Germans in the fields of music and literature, in the Reichstag of the Keiserreich, indeed in science, as Einstein and Schrodinger abundantly showed in their desire for world peace, and amongst the ordinary, decent people who never supported political extremism. Yet the tormented character of Ludwig Wittgenstein, a man whose abilities in an age of greater purity would have marked him out as a many-sided creative genius, reflected that flaw, the loss of memory of the spirit of Man in an age of iron.

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Chapter 26

The Swift Iron Burning Bee

The First World War

"But even as you wait
like Arjuna in his chariot
the ancient wisdom whispers:
Live in action."[1]

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES of the narrowing of vision that characterised nineteenth century thought were horrendous. Their outcome was the First World War. In the scale of comprehension from individual, to family, nation and humanity and finally to God, the vast majority of people saw no further than their nation. Materialism, reinforced by the growth of Marxism and positivism, cast

The Battle of the Somme, July-November 1916

its dullness over the human mind. The political outcome in Europe was an arrant nationalism, most virulent in Germany, where militarism combined with rapid economic growth to make the new empire of the Kaisers a bourgeoning threat to its neighbours. In France nationalism was weakened by divisions within the Third Republic and by the stolid conservatism of the peasantry, but the demand for the return of Alsace-Lorraine gave the French army a justification for an aggressive strategy and the desire for a struggle *à outrance*. The Habsburg monarchy sought to impose its authority on the diverse nationalities of its empire; whilst Serbs and Czechs looked to Russian pan-Slavism for support. Russia, in turn, shared with Germany an interest in suppressing the Poles, and its vast bureaucracy grappled with the problems of an empire that touched the sea of Japan. For Britain, nationalism was intimately associated with the maintenance of an empire extending over about a fifth of the world's land surface and population. As the "scramble for Africa" in the period 1870 to 1890 showed, when 80% of the continent fell under European control, white Europeans in general assumed an inherent right to rule, and often to exploit economically, other races. Nationalism created a susceptibility for war. The restless ambition of imperial Germany, in particular, brought this to the point where time was bound to provide the precipitous events. Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 led the latter's ally, France, to welcome an *Entente* with Britain and its extension to include Russia in 1907. French interest in Morocco drew threats from the Kaiser to intervene. A revolution in Constantinople, bringing young Turkish army officers to power in the Ottoman empire, made the Emperor Franz Josef in Vienna keen to strengthen Austrian power in the Balkans by annexing Bosnia in 1908. Russia and Germany stood muttering in the wings, the latter giving dangerously unqualified support to its Habsburg ally. In 1912 France raised military conscription from two to three years, and also agreed with Britain to divide the defence of the Mediterranean and the Channel coast between their fleets. The escalation of naval rivalry between Britain and Germany reached a new pitch after the construction of the first all big gun battleship by Britain in 1906. Two Balkan wars broke out in quick succession, involving the defeat of Turkey and then Bulgaria, but without participation by the great powers. In 1914 tension seemed to have abated. Britain and Germany even came to agreement on some minor issues. There was not the feeling of a storm coming.

The ruling classes in the mighty imperial nations of Europe lived in comfort and security, attending the regattas at Cowes, the racing at Chantilly, and the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, shopping in Piccadilly, in the Kurfurstendamm, in the Kartnerstrasse, proud of their empires in India and Indo-China, in the Cameroons and Kazan, only half-aware of the poverty of their working people, most of whom lived in urban slums or in peasant hovels from Kerry to the Kamchatka peninsula. The dream of empire, however, captured more than the ruling classes; claims to rule the oceans, to intervene in Morocco, to recover Alsace-Lorraine, to subdue the South Slavs, to expel the Turks from Constantinople were taken up by the people and transformed into music-hall songs and headlines of cheap newspapers. Minor nationalities, like the Irish and the Serbs and the Poles, would be punished for their insolence, but of course any consequent war was expected to be local and only a matter of days or weeks. Meanwhile, the fine ladies would continue to attend court events and visiting foreign sailors would stroll along the esplanades of potentially enemy ports:

> "The world on the verge of its catastrophe was very brilliant. Nations and Empires crowned with princes and potentates rose majestically on every side, lapped in the accumulated treasures of the long peace. All were fitted and fastened - it seemed securely - into an immense cantilever. The two mighty European systems faced each other glittering and clanking in their panoply, but with a tranquil gaze. A polite, discreet, pacific, and on the whole sincere diplomacy spread its web of connections over both."[2]

Then, on 28 June, in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg empire and, ironically, a proponent of greater rights for national minorities, was shot dead by a Bosnian student. For a month diplomatic exchanges sought to avoid war, but the authorities in Vienna, and perhaps even more in Budapest, wanted to finish once and for all the problem of the South Slavs. An ultimatum virtually demanding an end to Serbian sovereignty was more or less accepted by Serbia, but to no avail. When Austria-Hungary, blindly hoping for a localised war, prepared to attack, Russia mobilised in support of Serbia. Thus Germany was threatened, and since its war strategy was entirely built upon the rapid defeat of the French, followed by an attack on the less prepared Russians - the famous Schlieffen plan - the Kaiser offered France neutrality only on the humiliating condition of handing over the key border fortresses of Verdun and Toul. On August 1 Germany declared war on Russia and on August 3 on France.

In Britain public opinion was at first unsure of whether to fight; so too was the cabinet. The prime minister, Asquith, and the foreign secretary, Grey, favoured war, for they knew of the heavy moral commitment to aid the French, but it needed German violation of Belgian neutrality to convince the waverers, and the public, of the need to confront Germany. Treaty obligations to Belgian since 1839, and the fear of German control of the Channel ports, converted a vague sympathy for France into resolute action. By August the five great powers of Europe were at war. Briefly the veneer of civilisation remained intact:

> "Count Wedel added that they were doing all in their power to have a restaurant car attached to the train; but it was rather a difficult matter. He also brought me a charming letter from Herr von Jagow couched in the most friendly terms. The day was passed in burning the cyphers and other confidential papers ..."[3]

Throughout the capitals of Europe the euphoria of approaching glory captured the combatants, their womenfolk and old and young alike. German grenadiers in their field grey and spiked helmets were garlanded by Berlin housewives, French *poilus* in baggy red trousers and blue overcoats sang the Marseillaise as they marched through Paris, and bowler-hatted Englishmen queued with enthusiasm at recruitment centres. All believed they would be home by Christmas, perhaps even for the late harvest. Nationalism had reached its apogee; patriotism remained to be tested.

Initially everything depended upon whether the German plan would succeed. Schlieffen, chief of the general staff before the war, followed the classic doctrine of Clausewitz in staking all on a violent confrontation with the French armies that remained in northern France, behind those that were massed on the eastern frontier. By sweeping through Belgium, and then in a wide arc west of Paris, the Germans would destroy the French who were forced to defend the capital, and then take the

eastern armies in the rear. By exhaustive planning, using thousands of trains, the whole operation would be over in six weeks, leaving the weight of the German army free to drive eastwards across the Fatherland to drive back the slower mobilising Russians. Time was of the essence. The brilliant successes of Prussian arms in the 1860s were the inspiration.

Three unforeseen events spoiled the intricate but inflexible strategy. The Belgian army and the small British Expeditionary Force fought bravely to hold up the outer wing of the German advance, especially at Mons, where the Germans even mistook British rifle fire for that of machine guns. With time lost, the German wing shortened its arc and appeared north, rather than west, of Paris. Secondly, the Russians, by a valiant and rash effort, marched into East Prussia and drew off German troops from the western front. Thirdly, the military governor of Paris, Gallieni, realised that the invaders were exposed to a flank attack north-eastwards on the river Marne. The French riposte carried all the violence and elan of long training and of national pride. The nephew of the great von Moltke, accompanied perhaps by the ghost of Schlieffen, withdrew his battered armies to the river Aisne. Paris was saved and, ultimately, Europe was rescued from a hegemony of the overbearing scions of Prussian militarism.

Four years of terrible slaughter were required, however, to achieve that salvation. Vast, ill-equipped armies of Russian peasants were smashed to pieces at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes by the skill of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, henceforth the dominant leaders of the German war machine. On the western front, both sides took to the trenches, seeking to outflank one another to the north, until they reached the Belgian coast and looked back on fortified lines that extended to the Swiss border. France, meanwhile, had lost over three hundred thousand men in a few weeks of battle in Alsace-Lorraine, where their Plan XVII had embodied the spirit of "*attaque à outrance*" and sent the first flower of French youth to heroic and futile death.

In the trenches the machine gun reigned supreme. As each side launched infantry attacks across the no-man's land between the trenches, the machine gunners waited in their nests until the enemy were within range, and then opened a devastating fire on troops usually too heavily laden even to run forward. They walked obediently into the hailstorm of bullets. When occasionally they succeeded in capturing a trench, the difficulty in re-inforcing and supplying it left them vulnerable to counter-attack from the enemy's reserve trenches:

> "First came the preliminary bombardment and the agonising wait in the front lines; then the attack, with perhaps a fortunate few reaching the first German trenches to bayonet the survivors there; a brief pause, then the enemy's deadly barrage on their own captured positions, followed by the inevitable counter-attack; finally, the attackers, too few to hold their ground, driven back to their own trenches, decimated relics of the original force, the remaining three-quarters to nine-tenths dead, or dying, with their bowels hooked on the wire of no-man's land, knowing that unlike Gravelotte in 1870 there would be no time to collect the wounded, and hoping only to attract the merciful attention of an enemy machine gunner."[4]

Throughout 1915, whilst the Germans made deep inroads into Russia, the French and the British, whose volunteer army now numbered over a million men, assaulted in vain the German trenches in Champagne, at Neuve Chappelle, Vimy Ridge and Loos, whilst the Germans themselves launched an attack at Ypres, using poison gas. Most acts of bravery went unrecorded, but not all:

> "A wounded soldier of the Middlesex had recovered consciousness after two days. He lay close to the German wire. Our men heard it and looked at each other. We had a tender-hearted lance-corporal named Baxter ... As soon as he heard the wounded Middlesex man, he ran along the trench calling for a volunteer to help fetch him in. Of course, no one would go; it was death to put one's head over the parapet ... So he went alone. He jumped quickly over the parapet, then strolled across No Man's Land, waving a handkerchief; the Germans fired to frighten him, but since he persisted they let him come up close. Baxter continued towards them and, when he got to the Middlesex man, stopped and pointed to show the Germans what he was at. Then he dressed the man's wounds, gave him a drink of rum and some biscuit that he had with him, and promised to be back at nightfall. He did come back, with a stretcher-party, and the man eventually recovered. I recommended Baxter for the Victoria Cross, being the only officer who had witnessed the action, but the authorities thought it worth no more than a Distinguished Conduct Medal."[5]

Typical of the fighting was the British effort at Neuve Chapelle, where 12,000 died in gaining less than a square mile of ground. The futility of this was not lost on all the allied leaders. The first lord of the admiralty, Winston Churchill, Lloyd George and the veteran field marshall, Kitchener, devised a bold plan to carry the war to an entirely new theatre. The central powers' ally, Turkey, would be attacked through the Dardanelles, with a view to taking Constantinople. Substantial Balkan armies, notably the Greeks, might support an attack on Turkey, and the central powers would be crumbled on their weakest flank, until the Habsburgs were forced out of the war, and Germany was left blockaded by sea and alone to face advancing foes from west, east and south. It was an imaginative strategic vision, which Churchill especially saw as flowing from an initial supreme exertion by British sea power in the straits of the Dardanelles.

The fickleness of war shattered the illusion. The British admiral in command of the assault was taken ill. His deputy was less bold, and when several ships were sunk by Turkish mines in the straits, he decided that to reach Constantinople was impossible. In fact, the losses were particularly fortuitous; the Turkish mines were not impenetrable and the shore batteries could be matched by the fire-power of British battleships. Churchill rightly weighed naval losses against the massive slaughter on the western front which he sought to avoid, but he could not prevail. A combined amphibious operation was demanded. The army needed time to prepare. In the same time the Turks greatly reinforced the Gallipoli peninsula. When the landings came, the familiar predominance of the defence once more yielded its cruel and demoralising harvest. Individual heroism by British, Australian and New Zealand troops was nullified by a few inept commanders and by Turkish resilience. By the end of 1915 withdrawal was inevitable.

In the following year the fighting on the western front - seen now by the British and French governments as the only means of breaking the central powers - reached even greater intensity. A new German commander, Falkenhayn, decided to bleed the French army to death by assaulting a fortress which they dare not relinquish. Verdun formed a French salient, the collapse of which would enable the enemy to penetrate behind the allied lines to west and south. The battle raged for ten months, 700,000 men fell, and the gentle wooded hills north of the city were reduced to an arid, treeless wasteland, pitted with stagnant waterholes and the debris of millions of shells. Once more the defence held, and the German crown prince himself demanded an end to the slaughter. With Gallic irony, the single main road that saw a continuous convoy of lorries take men and supplies to the Verdun forts was named *La Voie Sacrée*.

The courage of the front line French troops was exemplified by Colonel Emile Driant, in command of two battalions of chasseurs in the Bois des Caures, a wood two miles long on a dominant rise in front of the Verdun fortress. He was a small, stocky man with black eyebrows and moustache and a determined look. Before the battle he had asked in vain for essential reinforcements and more barbed wire. As the chasseurs awaited the assault, Driant wrote to his wife, "The hour is near ... I feel very calm ... In our wood the front trenches will be taken in the first minutes ... My poor battalions, spared until now!"[6]. The opening German bombardment smashed several of the concrete machine gun posts; less than half of Driant's 1,300 men escaped injury. The colonel grabbed a rifle and left his command post to rally his men. "We are here; this is our place, they shall not move us out of it", he shouted. His requests for a French supporting barrage brought no response. Driant next observed German flame-throwers working their way over the forward French positions. His right flank had been taken from the rear, and now a direct infantry charge was made on Driant's own position. He stood outside the redoubt, directing the fire of his chausseurs, who begged him to take cover. "You know very well they've never hit me yet", he cried. The attack was driven off; but the position was untenable. Eighty chausseurs were concentrated around their colonel. He ordered them to break out towards the village of Beaumont. Driant himself paused in a shell-hole to give first-aid to a wounded chausser. As he stood up, he threw up his arms and cried out "*Oh, Là mon Dieu*" and fell to the ground with a bullet through the temple. About 500 men, mainly wounded, reached the rear lines. The Germans took the Bois des Caures, but they had lost a vital day.

For French and Germans alike Verdun was the hill of Calvary. Its horrors transported men beyond themselves into unknown areas of experience, exemplified - for good and ill - by a German participant:

> "It seemed to us then as if a quite exceptional bond linked us with those few who had been with us at the time. It was not the normal sensation of affinity that always binds men together that have endured common hardships ... It derived from the fact that Verdun transformed men's souls. Whoever floundered through this morass full of the shrieking and the dying, whoever shivered in those nights, had passed the last frontier of life, and henceforth bore deep within him the leaden memory of a place that lies between Life and Death, or perhaps beyond either ..."[7]

In the midst of the battle for Verdun, the British launched a massive offensive on the Somme. Deprived of the full force of the French armies to the south, and advancing the date in order to help their desperate ally, they attacked on July 1. Their commanders assured them that a huge initial artillery bombardment would destroy the German front trenches and barbed wire, but the machine guns, hauled up from deep dugouts, were fully manned as the assault infantry walked forward under their 70lbs loads of Mills bombs, groundsheet, rations, gas helmet and goggles, wirecutters, shovel, empty sandbags, about 200 rounds of ammunition, and, of course, a rifle with fixed bayonet. Most of the troops were volunteers, many in the "Pals" or "Chums" battalions that Lord Kitchener had formed from individual towns or occupations, calling themselves "The Glasgow Tramways", "The Forest of Dean Pioneers", "The Grimsby Chums", "The North-East Railway", and so on. At Thiepval Wood, the 36th (Ulster) Division contained whole companies from one street or village.

Between 7.30am, when the attack began, and 8.00am, over 10,000 men died in the few hundred yards between the lines on a fifteen mile front. A sergeant of the Tyneside Irish saw "away, to my left and right, long lines of men. Then I heard the 'patter, patter 'of machine guns in the distance. By the time I'd gone another ten yards there seemed to be only a few men left around me; by the time I had gone twenty yards, I seemed to be on my own. Then I was hit myself"[8]. About 20,000 British soldiers were killed on July 1, and about 38,000 wounded. It was the greatest sacrifice by the British army in its whole history. The battle continued for weeks more, until in October torrential rain created a sea of mud; the advance had measured five miles, the casualties were probably over 400,000 British, 195,000 French and 650,000 German. It had relieved the pressure on Verdun, and had gravely weakened the central powers, whose reserves in the long run were found to be inadequate. The wheat and bean fields of the chalky, undulating plateau of Picardy had vanished beneath a quagmire of blood and metal. Who but the dead could believe that the word '*Somme*' is derived from the Celtic "*samara*", meaning "tranquil"?

"None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,

Or stood aside for the half used life to pass

Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,

When the swift iron burning bee

Drained the wild honey of their youth."[9]

Whilst the Germans fought desperately at Verdun and on the Somme, their Austrian allies strove in vain to stem a Russian offensive under General Brusilov. By the time it finally lost impetus, the Austria-Hungarian forces were fatally weakened. Henceforth, all would depend upon the discipline and staying power of the German soldier, the iron will of the Prussian high command and the eking out of central European resources of war material and food.

One major naval engagement had been fought at Jutland in the North sea in May 1916, when von Scheer's High Seas Fleet had inflicted more than proportional losses on the Royal Navy by superior gunnery, but had suffered a sufficient mauling to keep it in its own harbours for the rest of the war. German hopes then rested on submarine warfare. If 600,000 tons of British shipping could be sunk every month for half a

year, the islanders would be starved into submission. The peak was reached in March 1917 with over 800,000 tons, but the Royal Navy had reluctantly accepted the convoy system, and had improved its depth charges and mines. As Churchill wrote,

> "the unceasing presentiment of a sudden and frightful death beyond human sight or succour, the shuddering concussions of the depth charges, the continual attacks of escort vessels, the fear of annihilation at any moment from mines, the repeated hair-breadth escapes, produced a state of nervous tension in the U-boat crews."[10]

Worse still for Germany was the entry into the war in April 1917 of the U.S.A., whose navy joined the British in patrolling the seas. Attacks on her shipping and the discovery of German conniving with Mexico won American opinion over to support President Wilson in a declaration of war. Henceforth the threat of a great United States army on the western front would increasingly enter into all calculations.

However, the spring of 1917 brought yet another failed allied offensive, this time under the over-confident French general, Nivelle. Its repercussions were almost fatal for the allied cause. A quarter of the whole French army had fought at Verdun. Now thousands more saw futile infantry attacks across the barbed-wire strewn no-man's land. Where lovely vineyards had grown in splendour on the slopes of Champagne, there now lay a labyrinth of trenches and tunnels, hiding a myriad of machine gun nests. The Craonne plateau, the long hog's back of the Chemin des Dames, and the wooded bluffs and ridges of the Argonne saw an early harvest of the blood of soldiers. Not all Frenchmen could endure so much as General Mangin, the man of steel who led them at the Chemin des Dames. A series of mutinies swept through the French army. Whole divisions refused to fight. Their officers executed an unknown number. Then a man was found who could restore confidence by combining resolution with humanity. Punishing only a few ringleaders, General Pétain saved the French army and with it the allied cause.

After the failure to take Verdun, the Germans had switched their principal effort to the eastern front. The massive, slow, ill-equipped armies of the Tsar of Russia began to crack and withdraw across the marshes of Poland and White Russia. Discontent amongst peasants, long disillusioned in their hopes for land reform and imbued with vague prospects of a millenium by the leaders of the Social Revolutionary and Bolshevik parties, spread through the ranks of the retreating forces. Men began to throw down their weapons and set off for the east. Personal command by the Tsar had little effect. The monarchy was in disrepute after the disgraceful episode of the "monk" Rasputin, who had beguiled the ladies of the St Petersburg court, including the Tsarina Alexandra, with his plausible mysteries. In March 1917 Nicholas II abdicated, following a general strike, the rise of a Soviet of factory workers, and the formation of a new government under Prince Lvov made up of members of the Duma.

Though many Russians wanted a truce with Germany, the premier, a Social Revolutionary called Kerensky (who replaced Prince Lvov in July) was determined to fight on. He became dependent, however, on support from the Bolsheviks, the Marxist party led from exile by Valdimir Lenin. The German high command realised that Marxist revolutionaries would further undermine the Russian war effort. They

arranged for Lenin to travel by train from Geneva, through German held territory to St Petersburg. By November Lenin was ready to strike. His dynamic leadership, matched by the administrative powers of Trotsky, brought success to the revolutionary seizure of power in November. An elected congress was swept away with the cry from Trotsky, "You are bankrupt; you have played out your role. Go where you belong: to the dust heap of history". That was the last word to be heard of representative government and civil liberty in Russia for seventy years.

Lenin had no scruples about making peace with Germany. At Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 humiliating terms were imposed on Russia. Finland, the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine were surrendered to Germany or German puppet governments. The Bolsheviks were left in control of the Russian heartland, soon to be assaulted by right-wing opponents, aided by foreign enemies, in a bitter civil war.

Brest-Litovsk allowed a million German soldiers to be transferred to the western front. In Berlin the Kaiser, his government and the German high command knew that time was running out, despite the triumph in the east. Austria-Hungary and Turkey were weakening, as the allies seized Baghdad and Jerusalem and held a large army waiting in Salonika to attack Bulgaria. The U-boat offensive had been overcome, and thus all hope lost of preventing American troops and supplies entering France. The Royal Navy was tightening the blockade, threatening Germany with ultimate economic collapse. More positively for Germany, a British offensive at Ypres in the previous Autumn had cost over 300,000 casualties for an advance of a few miles into the deep Flanders mud at Paschendaele. Ludendorff decided that the time had come for a final, devastating effort.

In the Spring of 1918, the British army between Arras and Soissons with 22 divisions faced an assault of 67 German divisions. The attacking forces infiltrated the British lines under the cover of fog and after a bombardment by 6,000 guns and the discharge of poison gas. Isolated British posts fought till their ammunition was spent, but the line was driven back into the wilderness of the old Somme battlefield. After three weeks fighting the Germans had advanced nearly forty miles, the defensive line bending in a great arc but never breaking, until the impetus was lost just short of Amiens. In Paris the guns could be heard more clearly than from the Marne in 1914. Typical of the British soldier of all ranks at this final crisis of the war for the allies was the commander at the centre of the struggle, General Rawlinson, whom Winston Churchill described:

> "Whatever the crisis, however great the success, however serious the catastrophe, he was always exactly the same man: good-humoured, jocular, cool, unpretentious; a typical English country gentleman and sportsman, but armed with a hard technical equipment in military affairs. It chanced during the war that I saw him at some of his worst moments of misfortune and in his hour of greatest triumph. I can testify that, whether his front was crumbling away or in the moment of a dazzling victory, he was always exactly the same."[11]

That steadiness of character, diffused through thousands of individual actions with bayonet, rifle, machine-gun and grenade across a battlefield of 160 square miles, stopped the German army from making a fatal breakthrough, to run amok in the fields of Picardy and capture Paris and the Channel ports.

By the summer of 1918 the scene was set for the final act of the Great War. French, British and now American armies prepared, in their turn, to attack. No longer would crashing preliminary bombardments give long warning to enemy trenches. Creeping barrages were skilfully synchronised with advancing infantry. Above all, hundreds of tanks now led the advance, smashing through barbed wire, overrunning trenches and disgorging protected infantry into the enemy lines. Aircraft, hitherto mainly used for artillery spotting and isolated strafing, now operated in co-ordination with the ground assault. The German *blitzkrieg* technique of 1939-41 was created then by the allies in 1918.

A supreme allied commander, Ferdinand Foch, had-been appointed during the Spring crisis. His ability "to make the dead fight" had drawn fresh endurance out of both British and French armies. Now the benefits of a united command became apparent as the tide turned. August 8, 1918, was in the words of Ludendorff himself "the black day of the German army". Even the morale of the stolid Prussian infantryman began to crack as the retreat to the "Hindenburg Line", and beyond, gathered pace. In October German approaches to President Wilson came to nothing, but on November 9, the Kaiser was forced to abdicate after mutiny had broken out in the navy at Kiel. Disorder spread through Germany, consequent upon near-starvation and the disillusionment of defeat in the field. On November 11 an armistice was agreed.

The First World War shattered a dream. The glory of nationality and empire besotted the minds of people of all classes throughout Europe before 1914, as the enthusiasm at the outbreak of war indicated. Pomp was beguiling; power was intoxicating:

> "In the Review which preceded the manoeuvres 50,000 horse, foot and artillery marched past the (German) Emperor and his galaxy of kings and princes. The Infantry, regiment by regiment, in line of battalion quarter columns, reminded one more of great Atlantic rollers than human formations. Clouds of cavalry, avalanches of field guns and - at that time a novelty - squadrons of motor-cars completed the array. For five hours the immense defilade continued ... The very atmosphere was pervaded by a sense of inexhaustible and exuberant manhood and deadly panoply. The glories of this world and force abounding could not present a more formidable, and even stupefying, manifestation."[12]

A German poet had been aware before the war of the change that was corning over Europe:

> "Ich sehe seit einer Zeit,
> wie alles sich verwandelt.
> Etwas steht auf und handelt
> und tötet und tut Leid."
> ("I have seen for some time now
> the change in everything.
> Something arises and acts
> and kills and brings suffering".)[13]

To the human mind nothing could justify the terrible suffering that the war brought to men and women of all countries, the dead, the shattered bodies of the living, bereavement, widowhood, fatherless children; yet undoubtedly for many it was a time of awakening from the dream of life, a recognition for the very first time of "the disease of existence", and an acknowledgment - strangely - of the presence of God, who could not be blamed for what men had brought upon themselves:

"Ist einer, der nimmt alle in die Hand,
dass sie wie schlechte Klingen sind und brechen.
Er ist kein Fremder, denn es wohnt im Blut,
das unser Leben ist und rauscht und ruht.
Ich kann nicht glauben, dass er unrecht tut;
doch hör viele Boses von ihm sprechen".
("There is one who takes all within his hand,
that they like badly tempered swords be broken.
He is no stranger, but lives in the blood
which is our life, now resting, now in flood.
I cannot credit that he can do wrong,
though I have heard much evil of him spoken.)[14]

In victory or defeat the greatest battle was with oneself. Flesh shrank from the whining bullet, the black speck of the approaching shell, the burst of shrapnel, the thrust of a bayonet. The senses turned away, sickened by the stench of dead men and dead horses, by the quagmire of a flooded trench, by the lunar landscape of craters and shattered trees on which the hand of war unseasonably fell. Mind broke beneath, the ceaseless menace of the enemy machine gun, traversing unseen in its lair; broke when the mortar rose in the moonless sky, and when the grenade lay unexploded on the duckboard, and when the sergeant's whistle summoned a platoon to climb the muddy wall and walk into the arms of death. Yet something did not shrink, nor turn away, nor break; and in that selfless moment courage was the first of virtues, as compassion was the last. For every lance-corporal Baxter and Colonel Driant ten thousand unknown heroes died in scattered actions of desperate violence, resisting alone or in small groups the onset of enemy hordes across the muddy wastes, fighting to the last round and to the last obscure breath, or staggering forward alone into the butchery of an enemy trench. So, too, in snow-blown crevasses above the Ozonzo river, men clung to rock and suffered the impacted barrage of a thousand shells. So, too, in the skies above France the airmen hung in their frail machines over the battlefield, or weaved faint patterns in the sky, knowing their lives expired in weeks, whatever the outcome of that day's battle. So, too, the thin-skinned battlecruisers of the northern seas awaited the one ton shell that from twelve miles range might hit the magazine and send a thousand men to smithereens; and the U-boat crews in their dark chambers of the sea listened for the shattering crack of the depth-charge that would split the plates of steel and send them to the fathomless deep.

Those who endured were not only men. In every belligerent country mothers, wives and sisters faced the martyrdom of the official letter informing them of death

in the service of the nation. How many turned from pangs of despair to the truth of undeparted life? Women, too, knew comradeship in war. A German baroness, whose husband found Colonel Driant's body at Verdun, heard of his valour and sent his personal belonging's back to Madame Driant in France, together with a letter of sympathy. A few, also, faced the same terrors as men. An example was the English nurse, Edith Cavell.

The daughter of a Norfolk parson, she trained as a nurse at the age of thirty and worked in Brussels, teaching student nurses at the *Ecole d'Infirmiere Dimplonier*. When the war came she elected to stay and took charge of a Red Cross hospital for the wounded of any nationality. She told the German nurses to go home and care for their wounded. When the German army occupied Brussels, she was faced with the dilemma of what to do with wounded British soldiers and, more acutely, with any unwounded who sought shelter with her. Two were helped to reach neutral Holland. Then she took the decision to assist all who came, despite her Red Cross status, knowing that this infringed the German penal code in wartime and rendered her liable to the death penalty. Together with a team of mainly Belgian sympathisers, notably an architect, Philip Baucq, she hid during the course of a year about 200 allied soldiers and successfully planned their escape across the Belgian border or to the coast. A description of Edith Cavell during this period was written by a Belgian friend, Louise Thuliez:

> "I well remember my first visit to the rue de la Culture (February, 1915). I was struck by the severe aspect of the little office in spite of the flowers that stood there. The furniture consisted of a writing table in the corner (with everything upon it in perfect order) and a bookshelf containing medical or religious works. Some maps and lists of regulations covered the walls; that was all ... A large bay window lighted up the little room, which seemed to wake to life when Miss Cavell entered, she whom the Germans themselves had named "The Angel from England", during the stay she had made in their country, then a mere novice in the service of the sick. Slight, of medium height, her silvered hair brushed straight back under her nurse's cap, her blue dress trim and spotless with its carefully-starched collar and cuffs - so it was that Edith Cavell appeared to me. The grey-blue eyes, intelligent and scrutinising above the vigorous chin, gave her a severe expression which disappeared at once when she smiled (this happened rarely, though, when she was discussing serious affairs). Her smile, once seen, could never be forgotten."[15]

In August 1915 a Belgian collaborator infiltrated the hospital. It was searched. Edith Cavell sewed up her incriminating diary inside a cushion. On July 31, however, two of the team were arrested. Five days later she herself was taken. The German military authorities told her that all those held had confessed, and, rather naively, she believed this and made a full confession. For ten weeks she was held in a small cell, but not ill-treated. She herself told an English chaplain that it was a time of great rest after the tension of the previous year. At her trial she admitted everything. Five people, including herself and Philip Baucq, were sentenced to death. The U.S., Dutch and Spanish embassies pleaded for mercy, but the German military governor of Brussels was adamant.

For some, the outfacing of pain and suffering brought a new life. Often it was found in friendship which transcended death in battle. Individual death became itself unreal, irrelevant to the new creature that had arisen from the smoke of conflict. An English officer thus saw his company of men:

"You became

In many acts and quiet observances

A body and a soul, entire...

Until one day I stood eminent

And saw you gathered round me,

Uplooking,

And about you a radiance that seemed to beat

With variant glow and to give

Grace to our unity."[16]

As the ancient wisdom whispers, even, on the battlefield, the Spirit kills not, nor is it killed, weapons cleave it not, nor fire burns, nor water drenches, nor wind dries, though the broken body lies on the wire. Even from the defeated nation itself, from a Germany whose pride was shattered with its crumbling army and its humiliated Kaiser, could the word of hope arise, from one who saw a little beyond the panoply of empire:

> "Moments there were, when out of death, and the rebellion of the flesh, there came to thee, as thou tookest stock of thyself, a dream of love. Out of this universal feast of death, out of this extremity of fever, kindling the rain-washed evening sky to a fiery glow, may it be that Love one day shall mount?"[17]

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Chapter 27

Beacons in the Night

Artists and Writers c1850-1945

"Aber noch ist uns das Dasein verzaubert".

("But still for us existence is enchanted.")[1]

"If despotism were to establish itself in democratic countries today, it would have a new character: it would be extensive and gentle, and it would degrade men without tormenting them."[2]

THE GREAT WAR OF 1914-1918 WAS the physical manifestation of a deep malaise. Increasingly, the growing productive power of western societies under the impact of the industrial revolution concealed deep rifts between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, city and countryside. As individuals became preoccupied

Boulvard Saint Denis in Argenteuil in Winter

with competitive success, so too did nations, and the war to end all wars reflected the individual's demand for land, money and prestige. In the spiritual darkness which slowly encroached upon the consciousness of men and women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, a few more enlightened souls pointed the way to higher values. Often they were artists or writers who themselves were trapped in the general circumstances of decline, but each in his own way offered a spark of light to the oppressed.

Alexis de Tocqueville, like John Stuart Mill, was acutely aware of a growing mediocrity in European society of the mid nineteenth century. Both writers associated it with the movement towards political democracy, but both knew that it was not the extension of the franchise that threatened to eliminate superior culture and the brilliance and variety of life, but the extension of the common mind. What they saw as the greatest challenge of their time was, indeed, how to reconcile the diffusion of political rights and of general education with the preservation of higher values and of individual liberty to think and to act differently from the mass of the people

The movement towards democracy was probably inexorable. On the broadest view, it was the third stage of the Platonic descent from the true aristocracy of the fifteenth century Renaissance. After the brief rule of Cosimo de' Medici and the intellectual ascendancy of the masters of Renaissance Europe, like Ficino, Erasmus, Colet and Bude, the emergent nation states of the seventeenth century were essentially timocratic. The struggle for mastery between France and Spain, the revolt of the Dutch, the rise of Gustavus Adolphus, the civil war in Stuart England and Marlborough's great stand against the might of the Sun King, were all led by a military, landowning class impressed with the ideals of glory and honour. These ideals did not abruptly end with the advent of a new commercialism in the eighteenth century, but the transition to oligarchy was evident in the style of government in England and France, the countries which were rivals for mastery in the wider world of sea-borne empires. Sir Robert Walpole and the corrupt Whig governments of the Hanoverian kings epitomised the change. After the Napoleonic wars a tendency towards democracy emerged, hand in hand with the industrial revolution, as increasingly harsh conditions in industry and mining drove workers to look for political means of expression and humanitarians to support their efforts. By 1848 capital cities throughout Europe heard the voice of the people and rejoiced or trembled at its approach.

What troubled thinkers like De Tocqueville and Mill, however, was their anticipation of a tyranny of the mind. In America the Frenchman had seen for himself how a rough equality of status and wealth engendered the view that every man's ideas were as good as every other's, that superiority of intellect and emotion were an affront to the common man, that the lofty idealism of an Emerson counted for no more than the views of an Ohio grain farmer. Moreover, they feared that with the advance of communications - the railway and the telegraph, for example - and of the influence of newspapers, the vigour and discrimination of independent men of rare mind would be drowned in the rising flood of majority opinion.

The century after 1850 largely confirmed their fears. Popular ideas spread fast as technology provided more and more means for communicating them, until radio and finally television brought the words of a demagogue or an advertising agency instantaneously into almost every home. Moreover, and decisively, intellectuals

themselves took the lead in justifying the very process. The despotism that degrades without tormenting became an ideal through the works of materialist and positivist writers and thinkers. Marxism and positivism were the two powerful strands of such thought, the former a reaction to the deteriorating condition of landless workers in the new industrial and urban society, and the latter a mark of the widespread abandonment of spiritual values. Both Marxism and positivism denied the existence of God. In place of God they substituted humanistic ideals that appealed strongly to masses of people, whose ugly and deprived conditions of life seemed to preclude a benevolent Creator. A heaven built on earth by human means seemed attainable and in keeping with Darwinian ideas of progress. Since organised religion so often appeared as an instrument of the oppressors - of the English aristocracy and wealthy middle class who owned both land and factories, of the Prussian Protestant Junkers and Ruhr industrialists, of the Russian Tsar and the great serf-owners - it was too easily dismissed as an ideology, as "the opium of the people". Nietzsche even proclaimed the death of God and saw contemporary Christianity as a debasement of Man. Whilst a few reform movements, like Michael Davitt's Land League in Ireland and the followers of Henry George in America and Europe, saw that unrestrained private property in land was the root of the economic problem, most reformers opted for some form of socialism, under which productive capital would be publicly owned or controlled. Saint-Simon and Proudhon in France, and of course Karl Marx himself, made no clear distinction between property in land and property in man-made capital.

The uprooting of men and women from the land was indeed a major cause of the growing sense of alienation characteristic of the nineteenth century. The poor wretches who eked out a living on the shores of Scotland after the Highland enclosures, the starving Irish peasants who crowded into boats for Boston, the Parisian craftsmen who struggled to form co-operative workshops in 1848, the Russian serfs who, after emancipation in 1861, found themselves committed to pay ruinous compensation payments to their ex-masters, these all knew that what they had lost was the land. They needed access to it to work and to live. There had not been free land for generations, perhaps not since a golden age which they could dimly recognise in folk tales and ancient myths, but within living memory the conditions of land tenure had become harsher, and in some areas, like the Celtic west, the Slav east, the southern half of Italy and much of Spain, they had become intolerable. Such conditions underlay the frustrated revolutions of 1848, including that of the Chartists in England.

Not only those who directly suffered from this separation from the land, but also many writers, artists and other intellectuals recognised it. Typical of them was the Dutch painter, Vincent van Gogh, who as the son of a pastor felt a mission to help poor peasants of areas like Drenthe in Holland and poor workers in the mines and cities. His earliest drawings were of emaciated, crippled miners and their wives in the stark landscape of the Borinage, near Mons, with its shrivelled blackthorn hedges, slag heaps and colliery towers. Throughout his brief career as a painter he strove to portray the agony of the common man impelled by a natural desire to be at one with the elements of nature, especially the earth, and yet almost deprived of contact with them. The sower, the shepherd, the weaver, the fisherman, the peasant woman gleaning, all are full of dignity in their aspirations and yet starkly humiliated in the poverty of their way of life. The potato eaters' gnarled and yellow faces express an

unbroken will to live and generosity of spirit, as they share their singular austerities in the dark recesses of a cottage; and the farmhouses of Drenthe sink into the black soil, like ancient burial mounds. Beneath the poverty, van Gogh saw the real connection. between Man and the land, that had once been complete and now lay suppressed, but still vibrant, across the face of Europe:

> "But in order to grow, one must be rooted in the earth. So I tell you, take root in the soil of Drenthe - you will germinate there - don't wither on the sidewalk. You will say there are plants that grow in the city - that may be, but you are corn, and your place is in the cornfield"
>
> "This is the important thing, I think, for in such natural surroundings, things can be aroused in a heart, things that would otherwise never have been awakened. I mean something of that free, cheerful spirit of former times."[3]

Van Gogh's famous picture of *The Sower*, painted in Provence in 1888, transforms an image of Millet into an affirmation of the true place of the worker on the land, striding the earth beneath the god-like Sun.

Yet the darkness of the times overtook van Gogh, a man too vulnerable to the unmeasured sensuality and materialism of his time. Yet before he shot himself, he painted for several years with the passion of a visionary, desperate to communicate more than his insight into man as a worker. He saw the primeval beauty of ordinary things - an old cart, the simple furniture of his bedroom in Arles, a pair of boots, and, of course, cypress trees and sunflowers. He could not achieve the supreme balance and detachment of his fellow countrymen, Rembrandt and Vermeer, but like them he could magnify the power of light, and unlike them he could bring that vision to bear in a time of darkness, so that his art would appeal to all who, in the dearth of the spirit, looked for comfort:

> "No result of my work could please me better than that the ordinary working people would hang such prints in their room or workshop."[4]

A writer who, like Van Gogh, went beyond the bounds of conventional perception was the German poet, Rainier Maria Rilke. Though he could not avoid the common plight of spiritual isolation, he did not abandon God:

"Die Blätter fallen, fallen wie von weit,
als welkten in den Himmeln ferne Gärten;
sie fallen mit verneinender Gebärde.

Und in den Nachten fallt die schwere Erde
aus allen Sternen in die Einsamkeit.

Wir alle fallen. Diese Hand da fällt.
Under sieh dir andre an: es ist in alien.

Und loch ist Einer, welcher dieses Fallen
unendlich sanft in seinen Händen hält."

("The leaves fall, fall as if from far away,
like withered things from gardens deep in sky;
they fall with gestures of renunciation.

And through the night the heavy earth falls too,
down from the stars: into the loneliness.

And we all fall. This hand must fall.
Look everywhere: it is the lot of all.

Yet there is one who holds us as we fall
eternally in his hand's tenderness.")[5]

Like his compatriot, Franz Kafka, Rilke was born in Prague, but wrote in German. He made Europe his homeland, being inspired first by the elemental and religious character of Russia, then by the artists' colony at Worpswede in north Germany, by the cultural intensity of Paris - especially by the sculpture of Rodin - and variously by Spain, Austria, Italy and Switzerland (where he died). This restless movement was a search for the rich experience which fed his poetic imagination, but also reflected lack of security and loneliness in a world by which he felt alternately enchanted and alienated:

"Wie einer, der auf fremden Meeren fuhr,
so bin ich bei den ewig Einheimischen;"
("As one who has sailed across an unknown sea,
among this rooted folk I am alone:")[6]

Rilke followed van Gogh in his reaction to the growing commercialism of European life, and to the dead hand of an industrialisation that brought separation and poverty to the common man. In Paris he lived in close touch with the harsher aspects of the city of *fin-de-siecle* luxury and ostentation, with the poor, the sick, the aged, the dying; and much later, in the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, he remembered the stultifying life of the industrial worker:

"Alles Erwobne bedroht die Maschine, solange
sie sich erdreistet, im Geist, statt im Gehorchen, zu sein.
("All we have won is threatened by the machine, so long
as it, instead of obeying, as spirit dares to command.")[7]

Yet his inspiration, and his message to his contemporaries, was that he felt in the immediacy of his experience the inner beauty of things, Ordinary objects, a tree against the sky, a child's roundabout, a lute, a swan, a panther, an orange, houses, parks, a Spanish dancer, were transfigured by their own presence, by the existence which is the light of the Atman of the Vedas.

"das Erwachen der Steine,
Tiefen, dir zugekehrt.

Es dämmern im Bücherständer
die Bande in Gold and Braun;"

("the awakening of stone,
the depths to be opened below.
Now duskily in the bookcase
gleam the volumes in brown and gold;")[8]

For Rilke was the type of modern Man, poised between despair at the darkness of society and a metaphysical delight in the beauty of the present experience, a condition which van Gogh revealed in the brilliant anguish of his paintings. "Only a step and my deepest misery could turn into bliss", says Rilke's Malte Brigge.

Whilst Rilke was almost broken by the rigid militaristic training of his schooldays and found solace in the artistic milieu of Paris and the Mediterranean, the German novelist, Thomas Mann, did not reject the orderly life of the north German merchant families of his origin, but transmuted it into the evolutionary story of *Buddenbrooks*. He, too, however, witnessed the claustrophobic mentality of the Prussian masters of the Kaiserreich, which could make mad the over-sensitive - like Hans Castorp - and plunge Europe into a mindless war.

The creative artist might totally reject the ethos of money-making, of competitive success, and of imperial rivalry, but he could not turn easily to any other ideal as an alternative, for art was no longer an integral part of social life. No more was art at the service of religion, as it had been throughout the Middle Ages; nor was it the expression of Platonic beauty, as it had been for a time after the Florentine Renaissance. Such absolutes as God or the Good were no longer revered. Materialism and positivism had all but destroyed men's faith in them. Hence the artist was left to fulfil his natural function of creating reflections of beauty without recognition by society, or even by himself, of his proper role.

Thus those who had glimpsed in themselves the beauty of the Godhead, were alienated from their fellows:

> "A genuine artist - not one who has taken up art as a profession like another, but artist foreordained and damned - you can pick out, without boasting very sharp perceptions, out of a group of men. The sense of being set apart and not belonging, of being known and observed, something both regal and incongruous shows in his face. You might see something of the same sort on the features of a prince walking through a crowd in ordinary clothes. But no civilian clothes are any good here, Lisabeta. You can disguise yourself, you can dress up like an attache or a lieutenant of the guard on leave; you hardly need to give a glance or speak a word before everyone knows you are not a human being, but something else; something queer, different, inimical."[9]

Yet drawing upon the traditional values of German culture, Thomas Mann saw personal salvation, in an age of materialism, in moral terms. The individual retained the choice between life and death, between awakening and descent into sleep. As exhaustive a writer as Tolstoy in the acuteness of his perception and breadth of experience, he conveyed with great precision the dissolution of institutions and individuals in pre-war Germany, whilst presenting in *Death in Venice*, for example, the stark decision between temptations of the flesh and love of purity. The classical tragedy of the death of the famous writer, von Aschenbach, bewitched by the beauty of a young Polish boy whom he meets in Venice, made only too clear that the way of ascending life is the rejection of images of pleasure and a turning towards the pure beauty which Plato in the *Symposium* ascribes only to the Good itself. Few in Germany heeded Thomas Mann's advice, but in the subtlety and measured perception of his prose he revealed something of the inner beauty of life, even in an age of iron:

> "He resolved, he rose to his feet and sought the nearest gondola-landing, where he took a boat and was conveyed to San Marco through the gloomy windings of many canals, beneath balconies of delicate marble traceries flanked by carven lions; round slippery corners of wall, past melancholy facades with ancient business shields reflected in the rocking water. It was not too easy to arrive at his destination, for his gondolier, being in league with various lace-makers and glass-blowers, did his best to persuade his fare to pause, look, and be tempted to buy. Thus the charm of this bizarre passage through the heart of Venice, even while it played upon his spirit, yet was sensibly cooled by the predatory commercial spirit of the fallen queen of the seas."[10]

In English literature much writing of the period was symptomatic of the departure from spiritual values and the onset of one form or another of materialism. In distinctive ways such writers as Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and Bernard Shaw all revealed the pessimism, touched with agnosticism, that found its apparent confirmation in the horror of the First World War. One, the Anglo-American poet, T. S. Eliot, was perhaps the most sensitive barometer of his age, and yet came eventually to some realisation of the need to abandon the prevailing fashion of apocalyptic despair engendered by the war.

Turning from the brash commercialism of the U.S.A., where multi-millionaire owners of trusts built their ugly mansions at Cape Cod and Galveston, and the expropriated millions crowded into the towering tenement blocks of Brooklyn or Chicago, Eliot elected to live in England, within reach of the ripe culture of western Europe. He steeped himself in the rather effete world of the upper middle class of Edwardian England, whose illusions were soon to be shattered by the Somme and Passchendaele. Even before the war, the music hall jingoism and the sense of a hierarchy of classes were wearing thin in face of the growing domestic violence of Irish and Ulster Unionist nationalism, militant trade unions and suffragettes. The old certainties of patriotism, class and religion were in dissolution:

> "On Margate Sands.
>
> I can connect
>
> Nothing with nothing.

The broken fingernails of dirty hands.

My people humble people who expect

Nothing."[11]

Even as he wrote, however, of the emptiness of life, of the sordid and mean habits to which disillusion stooped, his verse contained an insight, beauty of form, and a love of life irrespective of its content:

"O City city, I can sometimes hear

Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,

The pleasant whining of a mandoline

And a clatter and a chatter from within

Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls

Of Magnus Martyr hold

Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold."[12]

Eliot sought with great intellectual persistence for the emotional fulfilment which he and his time lacked, exploring both western and eastern philosophy from F. H. Bradley to the *Upanishads* - for which he studied Sanskrit - and the whole range of western literature from Homer to Ezra Pound. He finally found a spiritual home in High Anglicanism, but it was the sophisticated conclusion of a search that led back to its starting point -"There is only the fight to recover what has been lost ... In my end is my beginning." The Church was a kind of universal sanctuary for the poor women of Canterbury, as well as for the self-questioning martyr who could die at the hands of those who merely did what they were told to do. Within the Church, Eliot could return to the fold of a God whose compassion even extended to those who could not pray.

As a result his verse rarely attained simplicity, but instead pointed to a solution to the torments which he underwent as a representative of contemporary culture. He became aware of "the still point of the turning world", of "the moment in the arbour where the rain beat", of "the drawing of this Love and the voice of this calling", of "a deeper communion through the dark cold and the empty desolation". Such writing was not, as Eliot well knew, the culmination of a long matured style rooted in the rich culture of ancient Greece, like Homer's, or of Elizabethan England, like Shakespeare's, but rather the hard won fruits of an arduous journey back from the wilderness of spiritual decline to the inner fastness of a philosophy built with the fragments that could be gathered up in the twentieth century:

"Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

To be conscious is not to be in time

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,

The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,

The moment in the draughty church at smokefall

Be remembered; involved with past and future.

Only through time time is conquered."[13]

A Frenchman, whose art, like Eliot's spanned the traumatic experience of the First World War, was Claude Monet. He had witnessed also the national humiliation of 1870, the deep divisions within the Third Republic and the political scandal of the Dreyfus case, but such events did not seem to disturb him greatly, for he was a professional artist for whom work was a near obsession. When a subject caught his attention, he would paint it not once but perhaps fifty times, as he did with the view of the British Parliament at Westminster, after he came to England in order to avoid military service in 1870. What dominated his artistic life - as it had for Rembrandt and Vermeer - was light and, in particular, its power to create colour, so that his paintings seemed to generate light itself rather than merely to reflect it. His observation of the effects of light was acute: he noticed how objects may be seen as clusters of points of light, how the colour of an object affects that of an adjacent one by reflection, how the atmosphere profoundly changes the character of sunlight, how water reflects light in patches and even enhances its power. Thus he ignored the conventional delineation of boundaries of things and gave up what he regarded as the artificial attempt to portray all that is present in a scene. For his aim was to paint what the eye sees, not what the mind claims is there. He disciplined himself by long and arduous practice to paint only what he saw and exactly what he saw. When he found that a very large canvas required him to change his viewpoint in order to observe what would be painted at the top of it, he constructed a machine for lowering the canvas into a trench, so that his view point would not be changed. When he found that light varied from hour to hour of the day, he used a score of canvasses and worked on each successively for some minutes every day. Thus he created whole series of paintings of one scene, of which the most famous was the facade of Rouen cathedral at sunrise, mid-day and so on.

Such meticulous and devoted work never made Monet into an over zealous or self-important artist. In his early days he was a caricaturist and that skill never deserted him. A bourgeois *Luncheon* shows a rather superior governess watching the family eat; ladies in fine dresses in a boat are wittily almost devoid of features; a dandy stands angularly on a footbridge at a smart river resort; a small boy's shoe dangles cheekily from a chair on the beach between two elegant ladies at Trouville. Perhaps the best example of how Monet combined a sense of fun with profound attention to his craft is his successful attempt to paint the Gare Saint-Lazare as he wanted it:

> "He put on his best clothes, ruffled the lace at his wrists, and twirling his gold-headed cane went off to the offices of the Western Railway, where he sent in his card to the director. The usher, overawed, showed him in. The director asked Monet to be seated. His visitor introduced himself modestly as 'the painter, Claude Monet'. The head of the company knew nothing about painting, but did not quite dare to admit it. Monet allowed his host to flounder about for a moment, then deigned to announce the purpose of his visit. 'I have decided to paint your station. For some time I've been hesitating between your station and the Gare du Nord, but I think that yours has more character.' He was given permission to do what he wanted. The trains were all halted; the platforms were cleared; the engines were crammed with coal so as to give out all the smoke Monet desired. Monet established himself in the station as a tyrant and painted amid respectful awe. He finally departed with a half-dozen

> or so pictures, while the entire personnel, the director of the company at their head, bowed him out."[14]

Such an incident, of course, reflected the values of the Third Republic; it would have been unthinkable in England or Germany, where punctual trains were certainly more important than art.

Associated intimately with Monet's love of light was his unwavering resolution to paint out of doors rather than in a studio. Having been given the idea in his youth by the painter, Eugene Boudin, Monet was prepared to work in all conditions to fulfil his objective of a perfect reflection of natural light. A study of his wife, Camille, on the beach at Trouville actually contains grains of sand embedded in the pigment. For scenes on rivers, he would set up a studio boat, so that he could paint from just above the surface of the water in mid-stream. To paint snow, which fascinated him with its light effects at sunset or its blue reflections, he would sit at his canvas even in falling snow. (See *Boulevard Saint-Denis, Argenteuil, in Winter*, for example). Emile Taboureux described a conversation with Monet:

> "And with a gesture as expansive as the horizon, encompassing the entire Seine, now flecked with the gold of the dying sun; the hills, bathed in cool shadows; and the whole of Vetheuil itself which seemed to be dozing in the April sunlight that sires white lilacs, pink lilacs, primaveras, and buttercups: 'That's my studio!".[15]

Monet loved the land of France: the tall trees and the fields that lined the banks of the Seine at Argenteuil, the haystacks that shone like gold in the sunlight, the great white cliffs at Etretat casting their deep green shadows on the sea, the rocky masses above the torrent at Creuse, the dazzling colours at Antibes, the thronged boulevards of Haussemann's Paris, the snow covered stone villages of the north not yet obliterated by the shells of the First World War, the black poplars piercing the Autumn sky, the stone surfaces of Rouen, the quiet waters of the Epte.

Claude Monet's long struggle to be accepted in France, where he became the leader of the Impressionist movement (named after Monet's picture *Impressionism: Sunrise*, exhibited in 1872), eventually led to widespread acclaim, and later to inevitable reaction, as abstract art became dominant in the twentieth century. The permanent appeal of Monet to a wide international public, however, stemmed from two features of his work.

The first was the wholehearted emphasis upon light and its constituent colours. European culture had not entirely forgotten its origins in fifteenth century Florence, which still gave Europe its inherent taste in art. The image of painting was Marsilio Ficino's most frequent metaphor. When lovers are bewitched, he wrote, "the whole cause and origin of this illness is certainly the eye"[16]. Moreover, the true appeal of the light of the sun, is not physical but spiritual:

> "Since the light of the sun is incorporeal, whatever it receives it receives in the manner of its own nature. Therefore it receives the colours and shapes of the bodies in a spiritual way. And in this same way it is itself seen when it is received by the eyes. Whence it happens that all this beauty of the world, which is the third face of God, presents itself as incorporeal to the eyes through the incorporeal light of the sun."[17]

Hence Monet struck a note which chimed exactly with an essential quality of modern western culture, namely a predisposition to search for beauty, which lies beyond the physical world, through the sense of sight, a tendency laid down by the great painters of the quattrocento, Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Botticelli and the rest.

Secondly, Claude Monet was above all else concerned with what he called "instantaneity", striving to capture in paint the present moment.

He was aware of what the English poet, Rupert Brooke called "the mask of transiency". To his friend, the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, he said late in life:

> "I simply turn my energies to the greatest number of phenomena possible, since these are in strict correlation with the unknown realities. When one is on the plane of harmonious phenomena, one cannot be far from reality, or at least what we can know of reality. All I did was to look at what the universe showed me, to let my brush bear witness to it. Is that nothing?... the greater your understanding of things, the better your understanding of yourself."[18]

Monet's life was contemporaneous with that of the great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy. Growing up in the huge expanses of European Russia, where an educated and wealthy class of landowners were maintained by the labour of a vast peasant population only emancipated from serfdom in 1861, Tolstoy gradually became aware of the alienation of people from the land. He really discovered the suffering of the common people, however, during his experiences as an officer in the Crimean War, which he described in his *Sevastopol Sketches*. Conditions in the Russian army appalled him, and he became, like Florence Nightingale, an ardent supporter of army reform, especially the abolition of the barbarious 'running of the gauntlet' by offenders, who invariably died from the thousands of lashes thus inflicted.

As a rich landowner himself, and a man of enormous passion, he grappled with the sensuality and egotism prevalent in his time. In common with most men of his class, in youth he took advantage of peasant women and succumbed to the temptations of gambling. Yet he became tormented by his own frailty and embarked upon a life-long self-discipline, fostered by a yearning to find a meaning for what had become an empty and painful existence. At times he was very close to suicide. An experience in a country inn at the age of 41 remained with him for the rest of his life:

> "He awoke a short time later, in an empty, black, unfamiliar room, full of the rancid smell of burnt-out candles. Where am I? Where am I going? What am I running away from? The questions fell upon him like a flock of ravens. He went out into the hall. Sergey was asleep on a bench, with one arm hanging down, next to the doorkeeper with the sinister spot on his cheek. 'I had hoped to get rid of the thing that was tormenting me in the room', wrote Tolstoy. 'But it came out behind me and everything turned black. I became more and more frightened. This is ridiculous', I told myself. 'Why am I so depressed? What am I afraid of?' 'Of me', answered Death. 'I am here'."[19]

By this time Tolstoy was already famous as a great writer, having published *War and Peace* and soon to publish *Anna Karenina*. In the former he had apparently resolved the problem of death through the character of Prince Andrey, who dies, after living as an agnostic, in the realisation that God is love and that he, Andrey, will return to

Him, the source of all life. However, Tolstoy's personal struggle with evil and unbelief within himself was to continue unceasingly. His marriage to the emotional but dutiful Sonya Behrs brought him many years of conjugal happiness, and thirteen children, but did not solve for him the question of the threat of sexual desire, as his story *The Kreutzer Sonata* demonstrated. For Tolstoy, typically Russian, sought a total answer to the mystery of human existence, of "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" The Orthodox Church did not provide it for him. He objected to the ritual, to the blind acceptance of dogma, and to the apparently meaningless forms of belief. He laboured immensely to discover the real meaning of the Gospels, studying the earliest texts, writing copious commentaries, even at one time learning Dutch because he was told the Dutch Bible was the best modern version. Out of all this came a kind of personal religion, yet one which he intended to publicise and which attracted followers who visited him and even set up Tolstoy communities to follow his principles. He taught that Christ was not to be worshipped as God, but was to be revered as the master teacher. His words were to be taken simply, and not as they were interpreted by St Paul and Church tradition. Five commandments became for Tolstoy the essence of Christian faith: to give up anger, lust, the taking of oaths and resistance to evil, and to offer love to just and unjust alike. He amended his own way of life as much as possible in accordance with these, and in doing so faced the social dilemmas that had encroached upon his conscience earlier in life.

Living off the labour of others became abhorrent to him, so he took upon himself as many personal tasks as he could, such as cleaning his own room, even making his own shoes, and working alongside the peasants on his estate. He made over all his property to his wife and children, including copyrights to most of his books - though he remained troubled by the fact that he still lived in a fine house and was supported by the same sources of income as before. At the same time his writing changed from novels about the Russian educated classes to treatises and simple tales about common people and religious and social issues. Stories like *God sees the Truth but waits* and *Where Love is God is*, were extended parables, conveying essential Christian principles, above all the need for the commandment to love one's neighbour to be a practical rule of life in any circumstances.

Typical of this new idealism was *Master and Man*, a perfect fusion of this commandment with the social issue of the employment of labour. A rich business man, Brekhunov, whose whole life has been dominated by unscrupulous greed for money, makes a journey on sledge in the depths of a Russian winter, accompanied by his simple and loyal workman, Nikita. A storm descends upon them and, after many false turnings, they are irrevocably lost in a snow drift. Brekhunov seizes the horse and abandons Nikita; but he cannot find his way and, in despair, realises that he has returned to the same spot. Nikita is close to death from exposure. Driven to extremity, Brekhunov undergoes a profound change of heart; compassion floods into him and he is seized with one idea only, to save his friend, Nikita. He lays on top of him, sheltering the frozen workman from the blizzard; after a while:

> "His leg too would not move. He tried to turn his head, but could not do that either. He was surprised, but not at all worried by this. He realized that this was death, but this too did not in the least concern him. He remembered that Nikita was lying underneath him and that Nikita was now warm again and

> alive, and he felt that he was Nikita and Nikita him and that his own life was not in him but in Nikita ... And he remembered about his money, his shop, his house, his purchases and sales and the Mironov's millions; it was hard for him to understand why this man they had called Vasilii Brekhunov had concerned himself with the things he had. He never knew what life was about, he thought concerning Vasilii Brekhunov. He never knew, but I do. I know now for sure. Now I know. And once more he heard the call of one who summoned him. 'Coming, coming,' his whole being answered in joy and ecstasy. And he felt that he was free and that nothing held him any more."[20]

Nikita survived and Brekhunov, of course, died. The story was a simple evocation of the words of Christ, that greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friends. At the same time it was a devastating exposure of the landlordism and commercialism that made fellow men the slaves of avarice. The revolutionary implications of such tales were not lost on the Tsarist government, and Tolstoy became a marked man, probably saved from arrest by his aristocratic origin and his immense popularity amongst all classes of Russian society.

On the land question, fundamental to every western country in 1900, but especially in Russia, where poverty was on a scale unknown elsewhere in Europe, Tolstoy eventually adopted the ideas of Henry George and advocated a tax on land values which would place landowners under the obligation to apply rent no longer exclusively to their own uses. In *How Much Land does a Man Need*?, he attacked the general concept of land held as property in excess of its use by the owner. In 1907, three years before his death, he wrote to the prime minister, P. A. Stolypin, concerning the growing violence of both terrorists and government:

> "Two courses are open to you. Either you will continue in the way you have begun, condoning and even directing the policy of exile, hard labour and capital punishment, and, without accomplishing your aims, leave a hated name behind you and, which is more serious, lose your soul; or, taking the lead among all the countries of Europe, you will strive to abolish the oldest and greatest injustice of all, which is common to all peoples: the individual ownership of land."[21]

Leo Tolstoy possessed cardinal qualities exhibited by nineteenth century Russians: the inherited arrogance of the leisured class portrayed so wittily by Checkhov, the passionate wilfulness of the characters in Dostoevky's novels, the yearning for holiness in the tradition of Orthodox monasticism. In addition, however, he was gifted with a unique insight into the two central problems of his age: separation of the individual from God and unrestrained private property in land. These he never ceased to consider, to write about, and to face up to in his own life. Both problems were presented in a story of great artistry which was not published until after his death. It dealt with the career of a dynamic rebel leader, Hadji Murat, in the Caucasus, who opposed the Russian occupation of his country. Tolstoy did not shrink from portraying the cruel regime inflicted by the Russian troops, instruments of imperial policy fuelled by the claim for the land of others, and the insatiable hatred aroused in the victims. The spiritual issue is seemingly irrelevant, but, in fact, it appears as a subtle rationale for the whole story. For the death of Hadji Murat himself contains Tolstoy's answer to

the individual's quest for God. Surrounded by overwhelming Russian forces, with his wife and son in the hands of a native leader who is his bitter enemy and intends to torment them, Hadji Murat, mortally wounded, at last realises that these worldly terrors are unreal:

> "And these memories running through his mind evoked no feelings in him, no pity, ill-will or desire of any kind. It all seemed so insignificant compared to what was now beginning and had already begun for him."[22]

In the midst of an age of iron that reached new levels of depravity with the maxim gun, the trench mortar, the bombing of cities, the secret police of Fascism and Communism, the indoctrination of the young and the widespread abuse of scientific knowledge, these artists and writers – and, of course, others – uncovered a beauty that remained untouched. They struggled against forces of darkness both in the world and in themselves, a struggle which for some, like van Gogh, proved unequal, and which for others, like Monet, led ultimately to a certain serenity. Such men were beacons in the night. Never for long deflected from their course, they proved sufficiently indifferent to the turbulent events of economics, politics and war. They were the ones who might have said:

> "We are only undefeated
>
> Because we have gone on trying;
>
> We, content at the last
>
> If our temporal reversion nourish
>
> (Not too far from the yew-tree)
>
> The life of significant soil."[23]

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Chapter 28

An Armistice for Twenty Years

The Causes of the Second World War

THE GREAT ISSUE IN THE FIRST half of the twentieth century was whether German nationalism, distorted as it became by gross theories of racial superiority, and by the outright tyranny of one man supported by a band of criminally-minded associates, could triumph over the rule of law and the inheritance of Christian civilisation itself. There were, of course, other serious issues, especially the underlying economic problem of the absence of free land and the consequent growth of economic injustice in the form of poverty and unemployment, and the establishment by revolution of a Bolshevik regime in Russia committed to one party rule and whole-scale oppression; but these took second place to the cardinal issue of whether the barbarity of the Nazi party in Germany would triumph in Europe. For if it were to

Hitler accepts the ovation of the Reichstag after announcing an Anschluss with Austria, Berlin, March 1938

succeed, all other aspects of European life, economic and otherwise, would degenerate into the depths of ignorance and terror which were to characterise Germany and countries under its control during the period of the Second World War. If this be doubted, let the photographs of the inmates of Nazi concentration camps, of Jewish families being sent in cattle-trucks to be gassed in Auschwitz, of the ruins of Oradour-sur-Glane, where the *Das Reich* division burnt women and children to death in a church, tell their own tale.

These terrible forces of evil, present in all countries to some extent, but strong in those where fascism triumphed, such as Italy, Spain and Japan, and indeed in the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, were concentrated in Nazi Germany. They were focussed there around the single figure of Adolf Hitler, the haunted, Austrian-born corporal of the First World War, frustrated by feelings of inadequacy, and failure as an artist, but possessed of a truly demonic power of speech, which captivated individuals and crowds alike with its guttural vibration of conviction and power. To confront this evil genius arose men of authority, whose voices carried the contrary tradition of reason and law, who for all their personal faults were steeped in a love of freedom. Winston Churchill, foremost amongst them, had earlier been much concerned with problems of economic injustice and of Russian bolshevism, until the more immediate danger of Nazism demanded all his attention. In the military crisis of 1940, France also produced a national hero, worthy to cross swords with Hitler, but denied a major opportunity by the collapse of French arms. De Gaulle, too, sounded a note of freedom to which such brave spirits as Jean Moulin and other men and women of the French resistance could respond. In the U.S.A. Franklin Roosevelt saw beyond the isolationism which bound most Americans until the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbour, and called for resistance to a tyranny which, if triumphant, would soon touch the western continent. Such leaders, as they themselves knew, were the mouthpieces of those people in many countries, including even Germany, who valued humanity above national pride and despised the twisted beliefs of Nazism. Their struggle in the epoch that ended in 1945 presented more clearly than in most wars an episode in the interminable interplay of good and evil.

From the standpoint of Europe the Second World War was the second half of a war which had begun in 1914 and was interrupted by a long armistice from November, 1918 to September, 1939. The participation of the non-European great powers of the U.S.A. and Japan from December 1941 greatly extended the scope of the war, and indeed largely determined its outcome, but the seeds of war remained what they had been in 1914, namely the frictions between an ideal of individual liberty paramount in Great Britain and a concept of State power of which Bismarckian Prussia had been the exemplar. Field Marshall Foch, supreme commander of the Allied armies in the later stages of the first war, had remarked prophetically of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 that it was indeed an armistice for twenty years.

Yet it need not have been thus. Had wiser counsels prevailed, Germany would not have been subjected to a treaty which became a permanent cause of bitter resentment amongst a population who believed that they had fought honourably and had been offered peace terms by President Wilson (the Fourteen Points) which they could accept without humiliation. The harsh terms finally forced upon Germany, however, are easily explained. They stemmed especially from the feelings of the

French, represented at the negotiations by their fiery leader, Georges Clemenceau. On the western front, the war had been a vast conflict fought mainly on French soil. The sweeping, vine-clad slopes of Champagne, the plains of Picardy, the shallow valleys of the Somme and Aisne, the old medieval cities of Rheims and Arras, Amiens and Soissons, and thousands of agricultural villages had been devastated by millions of shells, by the tramp of German infantry, by cavalry and trucks, by poisonous gas, and by the armaments of the defending allies on their victorious march eastwards in the Summer of 1918, when tanks and aircraft once again turned the ancient fields and stones into a morass of mud and debris. Were the French people not to seek compensation from the invader of their homeland? Was the French peasant to watch the retreating Boche soldiers and ask nothing of them but that they return to their own unscathed cities and farms? Indeed not. Clemenceau, in fact, demanded more than Lloyd George and President Wilson would give him. The British newspapers might cry "Hang the Kaiser", but Lloyd George would not support the severance of the Rhineland from the German state. Nor was the Kaiser hanged; he remained in Holland, whither he had fled.

However, the anger of the victorious populaces could not be gainsaid. At Versailles the representatives of the new German Republic signed away Alsace and Lorraine, large areas of East Prussia (including a Polish "corridor" to the port of Danzig), Schleswig, Eupen and Malmedy. The Saar would be subject to a plebiscite after fifteen years. The Rhineland would be demilitarised. Reparations of £6,600 million were to be paid. Severe military restrictions were placed on Germany: her army was limited to 100,000, and denied a general staff, her navy was limited to ships of less than 10,000 tons with no submarines, and an airforce prohibited. Germany also lost its colonies, which became protectorates of the victorious powers. Some of these provisions were re-establishing historical claims, notably the return to France of Alsace-Lorraine, seized by Prussia in 1870. Many were attempts by France to protect permanently her eastern border, the frontier where numberless armies from the Germanic tribes of Caesar's time to the well-drilled grenadiers of the younger von Moltke had swept across the Rhine into the lush plains of Gaul; and by Britain to eliminate the threat of another life and death struggle in the cold waters of the Atlantic and North Sea. Those provisions of the treaty, however, which most riled the Germans were a clause which proclaimed the war guilt of the German nation and those which imposed reparations on a totally unexpected scale. Even allied observers, like the English economist, John Maynard Keynes, saw that such a financial burden was more than the German economy could bear.

In some respects the French were certainly being realistic. Even Germany stripped of so much territory remained a threat in post-war Europe. Her population and economic potential still exceeded those of France by a considerable margin. Furthermore, the three great empires of Austria-Hungary, Russia and Turkey had disintegrated as a result of defeat in war and revolution. Vienna now ruled only Austria (which was barred by the treaty of Versailles from union with its mightier German neighbour), leaving a ring of small, newly independent countries in eastern Europe. The Russian revolution and the consequent civil war had left the Bolsheviks in control of most of what had been the Tsarist empire, except notably Poland and Finland, but soon the doctrine of "Socialism in one country" would reduce any

military threat to the rest of Europe and render the Soviet Union an inward-looking State absorbed with domestic problems. Turkey was no longer a player in the power politics of Europe. Hence Germany stood alone in central Europe as a potential giant amongst pygmies, a strategic fact of which only perhaps the French and the young Adolf Hitler were fully aware.

The German people at the end of the war were beset by humiliation, disappointment and unrest. The Communist leaders, Karl Liebnecht and Rosa Luxembourg, had briefly seized power and had promptly been murdered. A military coup had only just been averted by means of a general strike. When Communists took control of the Ruhr industrial region, the Social Democrat government turned to right-wing army officers, notably General von Seeckt, to suppress them. Seeckt used Freikorps troops, soldiers who had formed unofficial bands rather than be demobbed after the war. Adolf Hitler, who had himself remained in army employment as a political agent when the war ended, noted such developments with interest.

1923 was a critical year for the German nation. Attempts, perhaps half-hearted, to make the due reparations payments were failing. The French, in retaliation, occupied the Ruhr, and their soldiers dealt harshly with the passive resistance that German workers used as their only weapon. As industrial production fell the government resorted to the printing press to balance the budget, a combination of circumstances making rapid inflation inevitable. From July, 1922 to November, 1923 the German mark rose from 493 against the dollar to 4,200 billion - i.e. it became worthless:

> "We were paid twice a day, and then everybody had a half-hour's leave so that he could rush to the stores and buy something before the next quotation on the dollar came out, at which time the money would lose half its value."[1]

Anyone who relied on fixed money payments or money savings was utterly ruined. Those who knew how to buy and sell astutely made fortunes, as did many of those who held land throughout the crisis. For example, Hugo Stinnes, who controlled mining and electricity companies, acquired whole forests to supply pit-props, the largest coal-mine in Europe (the Styrian Erzberg) and a newspaper empire. When he died in 1924 he owned hundreds of companies, largely enterprises with great land interests, like construction companies and oilfields. Junker landowners in Russia also gained from increased land values. Meanwhile, most of the German middle class were ruined, and workers lost faith in the ability of the economic system to provide secure and remunerative employment. Great impetus was thus given to the polarisation of political support, away from the parties of the centre and towards extremism of right and left. Hatred of the French was, of course, a further element in embittering German political life.

Hitler's day, however, had not yet come. His attempt to seize power by a *putsch* in Munich in 1923 was a fiasco, and taught him that a more cautious approach of violence under a cloak of legality was shrewder. This was proved correct when Germany's fortunes seemed to improve under the leadership of Gustave Stresemann, a politician who compromised over reparations, negotiated the Locarno Treaty of 1925, under which Germany's western borders were declared fixed, and welcomed friendship with Britain and France. The "Locarno spirit" lasted till 1929. Meanwhile,