

Two Eccentric Theorists of the Origin of Language: Oswald Spengler and William Olaf Stapledon

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Introduction

Cognoscenti of Generative Anthropology will have acquainted themselves with the history of language-theory in its broad outline as well as with the narrower history of those investigations of things human that sought plausibly to account for or to characterize, in one way or another, the origin of language and by implication the totality of institutions. Generative Anthropology is *itself* a late instance of the latter and its originator Eric L. Gans, in his study of *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day* (2008), offers a rare and succinct survey of *logo-* and *etho-genetic hypotheses*, as one might call them, from the seventeenth century down to the twenty-first. Gans writes, “My thesis is that human experience, as opposed to that of other animals, is uniquely characterized by *scenic events* recalled both collectively and individually through *representations*, the most fundamental of which are the signs of language.”^[1] It belongs to Gans’s thesis that, “If the human is indeed a series of scenic events . . . then the human must have originated in an event . . . the representation of which, the first example of language and ‘culture,’ is part of the originary scene itself.”^[2] Gans’s term “originary scene” refers to the logically necessary first occasion when the mutual awareness of the *ego* and the *tu*, mediated by an object of contention, articulated itself in a gesture or utterance that, lodging in the newly commenced self-acknowledgment and mental continuity of the group, could be recalled or repeated. Gans makes his own case for the intuitive likelihood of the originary scene, but there is a simpler argument all the more poignant for originating outside of Generative Anthropology, while lending it logical support. Every word in every language is a coinage. Whatever the word, there was a time of its coinage, of its first instance, before which it never existed. Traveling backward in his time machine, the observer would notice, first, a de-ramification of tongues until, an initial bifurcation into two dialects being annulled, only one tongue existed. In the case of that tongue, the traveler would then witness a diminution of vocabulary until he arrived at the first, and in its day singular and *only word* of that tongue’s vocabulary. He would have arrived at the origin of language.

Gans’s own explanation of *logo-genesis* importantly supplements the “coinage” argument by

explaining why the originary scene, as well as having been evenemential, must also have been scenic—a conspicuous and as it were eruptive occurrence with many witnesses to attest and remember it. Gans draws on René Girard’s model of a *sacrificial crisis* as the generator of a primordial institution whose coming-into-existence implies significance, hence also the sign or language. Girard’s sacrificial crisis involves a catastrophic breakdown of animal hierarchy and a concomitant outbreak of novel mimetic rivalry in the group. The group suddenly finds itself in the proverbial *war of all against all*, which resolves itself, in Girard’s explanation, through the spontaneous focusing of hostilities on a single more or less arbitrarily selected party, whom the crowd then murders. In Girard’s model, the singling-out of the victim generates the first sign in the form of the corpse which becomes the central object of the first communal awareness, while associating itself both with the preceding violence and the sudden peace of its cessation. Whereas Girard’s primordial signifier arises through violence, Gans’s primordial signifier arises through—or rather *as*—the deferral of violence. In Gans’s originary scene, as in Girard’s, a breakdown of instinct leads to an upsurge of contention—in this case over an appetitive object that everyone would like to consume—but there is a difference. The allure of the object draws all hands to appropriate it, but the convergence of all those hands engenders fear of violence. The hands draw back. “I hypothesize,” Gans writes, “that our originary use of representation creates a ‘sacred’ difference between a significant object and the rest of the universe, insulating it at the center of the scene from the potential violence of the rivalrous desires on the scenic periphery.”^[3]

The suspended attempt to grab the object and ingest it becomes, as Gans argues, by its very suspension, an act of designation, in which “through the mediation of the sign, all participants can imaginarily possess the object,” which impresses on the nascent consciousness a domineering numinous quality.^[4] The participants see the object as actively preventing its appropriation in an irresistible way. The object is for the moment all-powerful. Insofar as the designation of the object also effectively *names* the subject, the first sign constitutes the first name such that “the sign that designates the inaccessible center may be called the originary *name-of-God*.” The proposition nevertheless requires qualification: “What humanity has from the beginning designated as God is not the object that occupies the center of the circle but the Being of the center itself, which subsists after the destruction of its original inhabitant and whose will, conceived as the force that held the circle and its center in equilibrium at the moment of the emission of the sign, guarantees the sign’s timeless meaning.”^[5] Gans remarks that words resemble gods in remarkable ways, not least in their immortality, but also in their untouchable transcendence; words, like gods, appear to the incipient human awareness to possess a life of their own and to exert a type of glamour. Think of the Heraclitean *Logos*, which as its author says does and yet does not wish to be called by the name of Zeus. The *Logos* quickens the mind and brings order to what would otherwise be a chaos of raw perception. To utter any word audibly on any occasion has still today the social effect of calling the attention of others to the speaker, who thereupon becomes, even though but transiently, the center of a passing scene. All ritual

stems from the center-periphery structure of the originary scene, Gans plausibly claims, but also “what we call the imagination” because that “is a *mise-en-scène* before an implicit audience on a scene of representation internalized within the mind.”[6]

It belongs to consciousness once aroused and because of its structural reflexivity that it should seek to understand its own essence or nature: Its own origin. Gans has written in *Science and Faith* (1990) to the effect that religion, so obviously taking its ritual character and liturgical gestures from the originary event, functions as the first science, and moreover as a *human science*. “The point of the term *generative anthropology*,” Gans writes in *The Scenic Imagination*, “is that the scene of representation generates the meaning and structure that characterize the human.”[7] Whenever speculation contemplates the origin of things cultural, it tends to create a scene. Thus *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation-myth, and Sigmund Freud’s patricidal scenario in *Totem and Taboo* (1912) exist together in the same large genre or category—both indeed narrate the murder of a primordial being from which act either the cosmic or the social order stems. *The Scenic Imagination* consecrates its chapters to the chronological sequence of speculative reconstructions of *logo-* and *etho-*genesis beginning with Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, who have glimpses of a discrete generative event at the inception of society, and culminating in what Gans describes as the eclipse of the scenic imagination in the anti-historical thought and method of anthropologist Franz Boas and his numerous followers down to the present. “For Boas,” Gans writes, “the uniqueness of each individual society consists in its singular combination of discrete traits rather than its specific place in an evolutionary tree.”[8] The alternative to thinking scenically about the origins of institutions, consists, it would seem, in banning the topic. The result of the ban, as Gans puts it, is that the putative anthropologist “cannot tell us what the human is.”[9] The postmodern, politically correct version of the statement would read that *it is forbidden* to say what the human is.

On *The Scenic Imagination* the reader might justifiably endow the encomiastic description of its being systematic in its completeness. As Gans writes in his dedication, his wife prodded him to tackle an intimidating shelf of forbidding philosophical books, and his study was the result. *The Scenic Imagination* is nevertheless, like every other book, accidentally incomplete because no mortal person can ever read all the relevant books no matter that his lovely wife prods him. Fortunately although Gans is but one, he has many devoted students who by the accidents of their quirky biographies have read other books that lie outside the authorial reading program that yielded *The Scenic Imagination*, but which bear appositely on its subject-matter and insights. This present essay proposes to draw on the accident of its author’s eccentric reading to insert, as it were, two remarkably *scenic* thinkers into Gans’s sequence of speculators on the origin of language, consciousness, and culture. One of these thinkers is better known than the other, although he is little read; the other is much less known and today practically unread. Neither belongs to the anthropological Know-Nothingism of the Boasian dispensation, but both of them characteristically *think*

historically and both take religion seriously. The first offers a somewhat mystic explanation of the origin of language, consciousness, and culture, with roots in an early interest in the aphorisms of Heraclitus. The second has a theory of the origin of language, consciousness, and culture that dramatically anticipates Girard's sacrificial scene, with its primordial signifier.

Generative Anthropology, being itself eccentric, generously welcomes eccentric thought. This essay's two thinkers knew themselves in their day as eccentric and anticipated their increasing eccentricity in the future decades of what they forecast to be a relentlessly self-compounding, globally conformist regime that would shun both religion and history. The first indeed lived long enough to see the proscription of his latest book; the second achieved steady publication but in small editions that lacked significant distribution. Both men urgently wanted to know what the human *is* and both knew that the best road to that knowledge lay in the examination of institutional origin, especially that of language.

Oswald Spengler

Many more people have heard of Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) than have read him. Even so, the people who have heard of him but not read him know something about him: That he was a colossus of cultural pessimism in the period leading up to World War Two and that he expressed his doom-laden vision in an immense two-volume work entitled *The Decline of the West*, the first volume of which appeared in 1919, just after the Armistice, and the second in 1922. *The Decline* immediately attracted the attention of the German-speaking intellectual world being read and commented on, among others, by Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, and the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. An English translation by military historian Charles Francis Atkinson appeared in 1926, published in the United States by Knopf, and attracting literary figures such as H. L. Mencken, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and somewhat later Henry Miller. Spengler, who in youth had written plays on historical subjects as well as novellas and poems, earned his doctorate at the University of Halle in 1904 on the basis of a dissertation treating the fragments of Heraclitus. The dissertation, entitled simply *Heraklit*, will likely disappoint the eager Generative Anthropologist who seeks it out, but it will not entirely lack in meaning. On the one hand, Spengler rather unexpectedly minimizes the importance of the *Logos* in the fragments, but he mentions in passing that Heraclitus himself links the *Logos*, not only with self-awareness and orderly expression, but also with *law* and *measure*. On the other hand, Spengler devotes considerable discussion to the role of *fire* as a central organizing trope of the Ephesian's aphorisms. The anthropological interest of the dissertation arises in this discussion. Heraclitus made fire his central trope, Spengler writes, first because of "the artistic character of his thinking," and second because "he was led there by the same feeling which made fire and the sun an object of religious worship at all times."[\[10\]](#) Fire appeared to Heraclitus, a man "receptive to the aesthetically impressive," under the form of "something sacred."[\[11\]](#)

Invoking the phenomenon of an *aesthetic impression*, which he then links to the *sacred*, Spengler's interpretation of the Heraclitean fire contains something, even if only a constrained minimum, of the scenic. The informed reader might easily increase the minimum to make up for what Spengler himself omits. Fire exerts an intrinsically *focal* authority, and when it blazes, the eyes of all tend to linger on it. Fire has undoubtedly consumed many a victim, from those who figure in myth, like Heracles after donning his poisoned tunic, right down to historical people such as Joan of Arc and Giordano Bruno, so that it belongs saliently to ritual. Fire roasts the meat, which the master of the spit then distributes *in fair measure* to the expectant participants in the feast. Fire burns in the hearth as Hestia or Vesta, around whom the family gathers when it pays homage to the ancestors. Heraclitus himself links fire not only to the sun but also to lightning, which in turn he identifies with the *Logos*, hence also with mindfulness, whose *waking* character he contrasts with the sleepwalking insouciance of the dull-witted. An evenemential quality attaches itself to lightning, which sunders the darkness in a revelatory blast, but Spengler's commentary never remarks this. In *Heraklit*, Spengler presents himself more as the modern disciple of the ancient and awesome master than as an original thinker. A few themes from *Heraklit* nevertheless resurface in Spengler's mature work where they acquire heightened anthropological significance and become elements in a theory of language. Spengler's mature work consists of three books—*The Decline, Man and Technics* (1932), and *The Hour of Decision* (1934). The most relevant portion of *The Decline* for a theory of language is Volume II, Chapter V; and of *Man and Technics*, the two chapters, III and IV. In respect of any theory of language, *The Hour of Decision*, despite its compelling critique of the liberal order, contains no relevant material.

The Decline resists classification; it even eludes description, but one must try. John Fahrenkopf, writing in *Prophet of Decline* (2001), declares that "*Decline of the West* is one of the most profound investigations of the nature, evolution, and future of Western civilization in intellectual history."^[12] Fahrenkopf adds that, in *The Decline*, "Spengler orchestrates a symphony of world history with magisterial, Wagnerian effect and Nietzschean, neological creativity."^[13] Fahrenkopf remarks that *The Decline*, as much as it is historical, is also *futurelogical*.^[14] In his Wagnerian reference, Fahrenkopf provides an essential insight about *The Decline's* encyclopedic character and its polythematic constitution, interweaving its many theses and motives through different combinations in its proliferating chapters: Like *The Ring of the Nibelung*, Spengler's two volumes tell a story of *origins* and *ends*, of *emergence* and *fulfillment*. Like Wagner's operatic tetralogy, *The Decline* partakes in a type of mythopoeia. Spengler sees history, because it manifests itself only in the symbolic realm, as non-amenable to the methods of natural science, and as genuinely approachable only through the heuristic of intuition or as he calls it *physiognomic tact*. In popular psychological terms Spengler locates himself in the camp of the right-brain thinkers as opposed to that of the left-brain thinkers. He is more poet and visionary, like his hero in youth Heraclitus, than scholar; hence his numerous mordant dismissals of Immanuel Kant as having treated the mind and its creations the way Isaac Newton treated nature.

Spengler seeks participation in the phases of consciousness of those Great Cultures, chiefly the Classical and the Western, to which he directs his interest. He wants especially to re-experience, as far as possible, and as inwardly as possible, the moment of inception of a Great Culture and its subsequent metamorphoses. In this sense, Spengler's method might be described both as archeological and generative.

Spengler's prose often partakes in idiosyncrasy, which his English translator Charles Francis Atkinson attempts rather to reproduce than to mitigate. In *The Decline and Man and Technics*, then, Spengler defines and characterizes language in a variety of ways, some of which pose a challenge for ready understanding. In *The Decline*, in introducing the topic, Spengler writes how, "Human beings possess [a] microcosmic-animal side of life, in waking consciousness and receptivity and reason"; and how "the form in which the waking-consciousness of one man gets into relation with that of another I call *language*."^[15] According to the same passage, language "begins by being a mere unconscious living expression that is received as a sensation, but gradually develops into a conscious *technique of communication* that depends upon a common sense of the meanings attaching to signs."^[16] Spengler takes pains to distinguish what he designates as *race* from what he designates as *language*. Race, for Spengler, "is something cosmic and psychic, periodic in some obscure way, and in its inner nature partly conditioned by major astronomical relations."^[17] As for languages, they "are causal forms, and operate through the polarity of their means."^[18] Thus, "we speak of race instincts and the spirit of language," such that "to Race belong the deepest meaning of the words 'time' and 'yearning,'" while "to language [belong] those of 'space' and 'fear.'"^[19] On the one hand, language amounts to "the entire free activity of the waking microcosm in so far as it brings something to expression *for others*."^[20] On the other hand, "there are . . . expression-languages and *communication languages*."^[21] In *Man and Technics*, language has to do with *selection*. Spengler identifies language as a "mutation" that effectuates in man "*liberation from the compulsion of genus*, a phenomenon unique in the history of life on this planet."^[22] With language, moreover, "Man comes into being."^[23]

Can the contradictions and obscurities be resolved? In *The Decline*, language *begins* as something unconscious and only *gradually* becomes "a conscious *technique of communication*." In *Man and Technics*, language announces the coming-into-being of man *as such*-as the conscious subject; and language furthermore presents itself as an abrupt *mutation*, which is to say, an event, not a gradualism. Spengler's coinage of a *microcosmic-animal side of life*, which subsumes *waking consciousness, receptivity, and reason*, confuses the issue in its second term, *animal*, except that in other remarks he imputes a high degree of consciousness to animals, particularly to dogs. It is unclear immediately what Spengler means in *The Decline* by assigning to language the descriptor *causal form* although in *Man and Technics* language apparently *causes* the emergence of man from whatever precedes him. In *The Decline*, nevertheless, language has communal status; by means of language one subject establishes an articulate relation with another. *Expression*, in particular,

involves *waking-consciousness* and directs itself *to others*. Spengler's contention that to *race*, whatever it is, attach the profound experiences of *time* and *yearning*, whereas to *language*, whatever it is, attach the profound experiences of *space* and *fear*, while oracular, is also tantalizing. Language would have something to do with *fear*, but fear of what? Language would also have something to do with *spirit*, which perhaps links itself to *receptivity* and *reason*; and it would have something to do with *the sign*. If one were to superimpose the later *Man and Technics* on the earlier *Decline*, one might justifiably conclude that in Spengler's view the sign exerts a power to abrogate *genus*, or instinct, and to open up the domain of freedom.

Subsequent passages in both *The Decline* and *Man and Technics* resolve a number of these obscurities and contradictions. *The Decline*, for example, in delving deeper into the distinction between expression and communication, links language with cult-activity and religion. Expression-language, Spengler asserts, springs from the "the longing inherent in all life to actualize itself before witnesses, to display its own presence to itself."[\[24\]](#) Communication-language takes the form of utterances "meant to be *understood by definite beings*," which presuppose "a connexion of waking-beings."[\[25\]](#) Communication-language, Spengler writes, "postulates a 'thou.'"[\[26\]](#) While Spengler emphasizes the differences in mode, he qualifies the distinction by arguing that the two modes interpenetrate one another. Religion and artistic effort operate mainly in the domain of expression, but their impulse inevitably flavors communication: "All linkages of Waking-Being [bear] a religious stamp."[\[27\]](#) Spengler now returns to the problem of semiosis—and in a remarkable manner. He writes that: "What we know to be inherent in every genuine religious or artistic form-language, and particularly in the history of every script (for writing is verbal language for the eye), holds without doubt for the origin of human articulate speech in general—indeed the prime words (of the structure of which we know nothing whatever) must also certainly have had a cult-colouring."[\[28\]](#) Spengler returns to the topic of the "prime words" later in Chapter V, specifying that the first utterance was that of a "name—a vocal image serving to denote a Something in the world-around, which was felt as a being, and by the act of naming became a numen."[\[29\]](#) He adds that "with the Name," not only language, but "religion in the proper sense, *definite* religion in the midst of formless quasi-religious awe, came into being."[\[30\]](#) Through language, the *physical*, which is synonymous with *genus*, becomes the *metaphysical*, which is synonymous with consciousness.

The original utterance partook of a compact character that the modern mind can comprehend only with difficulty. The "Name" signified "Man's awakesness and awareness . . . in an illuminated space," while the utterer "conceived of his ego as the middle point in the light."[\[31\]](#) The "Name" immediately attached itself not only to a single item and its *numen*, but to plural items and their *numina*. Once things acquired names, they became "anchored in the memory."[\[32\]](#) Spengler stresses the visibility of things, their "position and duration in space," the illuminated space, as it radiates beyond the central position of the ego.[\[33\]](#) Among these things are other embodiments of the central ego. Humanity appears to itself.

In these speculations, Spengler partially redeems the inadequacies of his dissertation on Heraclitus, in whose aphorisms the lightning-like *Logos*, which does and does not wish to be called by the name of Zeus, illuminates consciousness from within. Spengler's theory of language-origin in *The Decline* resolves itself-gradually, as one might say, after a confused and somewhat stuttering start-into a something like a scenic theory. A name is an ostensive. Spengler envisions a phase of purely nominal or ostensive language. If the name were epochal, inaugurating consciousness, as Spengler argues, then "the second great turning-point was the use of *grammar*," the index of which was "the verbal relation" or "the verb-sign."^[34] There is a degree of Germanic psychologism in Spengler's musings on language. On emerging, the waking-consciousness views the external world as a chaos. The capitalized Name brings order to that chaos.

Spengler brings into his discussion of the primal word the notions of *totem* and *taboo*. "The totem side of life is plantlike and inheres in all being," he writes, "while the taboo side is animal and supposes the free movement of a being in the world."^[35] Spengler deploys a series of dichotomous word-pairs, which enables the reader better to grasp his meaning. He yokes, as previously noted, *race* and *language*, and then again *yearning* and *fear*, and *pulse* and *tension*. In each case the second term signifies consciousness. The taboo therefore lodges itself securely with the instrument of consciousness or language, but it also betokens culture. "All that is of taboo," as Spengler writes, "has system."^[36] Spengler never cites the standard definition of *taboo*, but in general in anthropological discussion it refers to a prohibition, or indeed a system of prohibitions, and has a relation to the sacred. When the consensus places a taboo on an object, the object acquires two characteristics: It stands out conspicuously and provokes yearning, but the prohibition, experienced as fear, enjoins any acquisition. Whereas the item under taboo stands outside acquisition, "that which is of taboo . . . is learnable and acquirable" and supplies the content of tribal or cultic initiation.^[37] Spengler believes that the advent of language occurred as recently as seven thousand years ago and that the fully formed languages of the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, among others, needed only two thousand years to develop.

The sections of *Man and Technics* that address the origin of language are more explicitly anthropological and at the same time less abstract than the corresponding sections in *The Decline*, but they assume what Spengler lays out in *The Decline*. In *Man and Technics*, as the title would suggest, Spengler directs his interest to the development of instrumentality. The spiritual upheaval inherent the emergence of language and consciousness entails, according to Spengler, physiological consequences. The hand, essential to gesture, altered its form simultaneously with the bursting-forth of the word. Of the modern hand, Spengler writes: "Its origin must have been *sudden*; in terms of the tempo of cosmic currents it must have happened, like everything else that is decisive in world-history (epoch-making in the highest sense), as abruptly as a flash of lightning or an earthquake."^[38] Spengler presents himself as extraordinarily skeptical of "an 'evolutionary' process."^[39] He prefers *catastrophic* explanations to invocations of gradualism which really explain nothing. The

abrupt modification of the hand has a correlate. "Not only must man's hand, gait, and posture have come into existence together," Spengler writes, "but—and this is a point that no one hitherto has observed—*hand and tool* also." [40] The tool that Spengler has in mind is the weapon, which reflects the fact that man is both predator and prey; and as the latter, his chief predator is himself. Early societies had to organize themselves for defense. The topic of language now reenters the discussion. Communal enterprise orients itself to the future, relies on memory, and requires a means of long-term organization. As Spengler affirms, "For . . . collective procedure the indispensable prerequisite is a medium, *language*." [41]

In *Man and Technics*, Spengler underlines the spontaneity and survival-orientation of language, as it developed beyond the purely nominal. "The part played by theoretical reflection in the beginnings of speaking in sentences," he writes, "was practically *nil*"; rather, "all speech was of a practical nature and proceeded from 'the thought of the hand.'" [42] Spengler has his version of the imperative as the follow-on to the ostensive. "What, then, are the basic forms of speech," he asks. "Not the judgment and the declaration," he answers, "but the *command*, the expression of obedience, the enunciation, the question, the affirmation or negation." [43] It is not necessary in Spengler's view that the first utterance be a vocalization. As his phrase "thought of the hand" suggests, the first designation of a conspicuous object, in which the community as a whole takes interest, might well have been a gesture. Indeed, Spengler remarks that non-verbal elements persist in fully developed speech and that they might well be understood as the foundation on which a developed sentential speech rests. Spengler writes: "I have elsewhere shown that speaking in sentences is preceded by simpler forms of communication, such as signs for the eye, signals, gestures, and warning and threatening calls. All these continue in use, even today, as auxiliaries to speaking, as melodious speech, emphasis, in the play of one's features and hands, and (in written speech) punctuation." [44] If the first utterance were a gesture, then it might well have been (what else could it have been?) a gesture of designation.

Despite the oddity, the mystic obscurity, of his prose, and despite the fact that his interest in language is somewhat peripheral to his interest in the Great Cultures and their histories, Spengler's intuitions about the nexus of language-consciousness-culture manage to cohere. The main elements of that coherence are that language must have an abrupt or catastrophic origin, a corollary of which is that a gradualist or evolutionary account of language explains nothing; that the first utterance concerned an object of interest for the whole community, which, in its character as *taboo* at once attracted interest and was experienced by its onlookers as repelling that interest; that the same first utterance, the capitalized Name, has features of the ostensive and is thus actually pre-nominal; and that the next linguistic development after the Name is the verb, in the imperative, as a command. In Gans's gallery of language-origin theories in *The Scenic Imagination*, the one to which Spengler's theory shows the most direct relation is that of Max Müller; but, for all its limitations, Spengler's theory nevertheless contains elements that Müller's lacks. Gans writes that Müller's

positing of the sun as the first object of collective awareness suffers from the weakness that it “presents our attribution of root-names to the sun as a gratuitous act of mythological *enfantillage* rather than a practical act of language use.”^[45] Gans adds that Müller’s philological orientation and his focus on the study of Sanskrit influenced him to suppose tribal organization, and therefore also social stability, as the degree-zero of human society. Müller never poses the question of what might have generated social stability in the first place. Spengler’s insistence on *abruptness*, on a “mutation,” and his recourse to the Heraclitean metaphor of *lightning* (not the Viconian “thunder”) evokes an evenemential intuition—precisely the intuition that Müller almost systematically avoids. Spengler explicitly asserts that language was born with a practical purpose although he remains rather vague about what that purpose was. Müller and Spengler see language and religion as co-primordial and as *scenic*, but only Spengler sees them as co-emergent. Spengler must have read Müller although in neither of the indices of the two volumes of *The Decline*, nor in the pages of *Man and Technics*, does the name of Müller appear.

Olaf Stapledon

Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950), who was born six years after Spengler and outlived Spengler by fourteen years, has a good deal in common intellectually with his German counterpart. He undoubtedly read *The Decline of the West*, when its two volumes made their appearance in English. Spengler would most probably not have known of Stapledon, but would have appreciated Stapledon’s visionary style as convergent with his own, had he become aware of it. One important difference does intrude in the similarity: Spengler leaned to the right politically and Stapledon, in a quirky way, to the left. He was a utopian, with a penchant for socialism.

Like Spengler, Stapledon had a philosophical background. He took his baccalaureate in history at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1909, and his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Liverpool in 1925, where he also lectured on philosophy for many years. Financially independent, he devoted the greater part of his energy to writing. While Stapledon’s reputation stands on his accomplishments in fiction—*Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937) rank as his masterpieces—he also wrote many non-fiction books on history, religion, sociology, and philosophy. One of Stapledon’s non-fiction books has the title of *Waking World* (1934). In it, readers will encounter in an early chapter the programmatic announcement, hopeful from a generative anthropological perspective, that, “In this book I shall describe human nature, or rather human behaviour, as simply as possible from a certain point of view which is at once very friendly toward modern science and very critical.”^[46] The hopeful reader will be disappointed. Stapledon never directly addresses the origin of the human nature that he would describe. In the chapters on philosophy and religion, however, Stapledon achieves, through his criticism of standard, purely materialistic socialism, a number of insights that rescue the book from its stretches of utopian superficiality. These same insights link themselves to Stapledon’s actual theory of

ethogenesis, which appears in an episode of *Last Men in London* (1932).

Stapledon wants to implement socialism, which generally presents itself as a species of materialism. Matter, or the labor that involves itself in matter, instigates consciousness, which thereby acquires an entirely secondary status. Despite his politics, Stapledon recoils from reductive materialism. He senses a mystery in consciousness that challenges material causality. He experiences alienation from institutional religion, but at the same time he admires aspects of religion, in particular of Christianity, but only apart from its expression in the various churches. Stapledon also equates the mystical tradition in philosophy with religion and would validate it, too. A mystical impulse, or interest in the transcendent, seems for Stapledon to furnish the basis of consciousness and therefore in some sense to be the root of consciousness. The essence of the mystical impulse is, as Stapledon writes, “sheer admiration, intense and deeply rooted, either of God or the gods or of the universe or at least something more than human beings.”^[47] In such a transcendent mood the subject “finds himself confronted with a kind of overwhelming beauty or excellence invisible at other times.”^[48] This is an intuition, of course, not a perception; which is to say that it is a *representation*. Because it is infused by awareness of “the great many-bodied whole of which each man felt himself to be a member,” ^[49] that same representation is a *collective representation*. While Stapledon, in *Waking World*, never produces a generative theory, he does describe his fundamental intuition, which he posits as the highest degree of consciousness, as partaking in beauty and a sense of rightness.

Stapledon’s *originary scene* appears in *The Last Men in London*, a sequel to *Last and First Men*. Some account must be given of these two remarkable books, as idiosyncratic in their way as Spengler’s *Decline*. Indeed, *Last and First Men*, if not so much *Last Men in London*, resembles Spengler’s *Decline*. The latter presents itself as a study of the Great Cultures with the aim of identifying the phases of cultural ontogeny and their *indicia*; the *Decline*, an historical study, necessarily looks backwards. *Last and First Men* presents itself as the supposedly non-fictional narrative of the successive phases of humanity, beginning with the current phase (the “First Men” of the title), but stretching away unto two billion years in the future to the “Eighteenth Men.” The narrative structure of *Last and First Men*, the New-Testament allusion in whose title ought to be remarked, has the Last Men probing backwards through time *via* telepathy so as to recover as thoroughly as possible their own remote origins. It is the oracular *Know Thyself* writ cosmically large. Stapledon’s audacious story reaches its readers through an intermediary narrator, identifying himself as “W.O.S.,” on whose consciousness the Last Men have endowed the total knowledge gleaned from their detailed temporal explorations. Stapledon thus arranges that a representative of the First Men and a representative of the Last Men confront one another across two billion years of time—but also across the scene or panoply of notable human events. Paradoxically, the First Man enjoys the opportunity to remember events that, from his perspective, have not yet occurred; and his readers share this opportunity. The confrontation has an ethical character. As the Last Man informs the book’s audience: “We who are the Last Men

earnestly desire to communicate with you, who are members of the first human species. We can help you, and we need your help.”[\[50\]](#) The meeting of minds has as its goal the reciprocity of an exchange.

Repeatedly in Stapledon’s unfolding saga of the eighteen human phases, prophet-martyrs appear whose deaths promote them to quasi-divinity and generate religious cults. One of these, the Divine Boy, belongs to the final, Patagonian phase of the First Men, some two hundred thousand years in the future. The Divine Boy’s story anticipates the *originary scene* in *Last Men in London*, just as it echoes, in a weirdly Nietzschean way, the Passion of Christ. The Patagonians are an enfeebled humanity, morose, short-lived, quick to age, sexually repressed, and inclined to pessimism. In their official religion they worship a “monotheistic impersonation of Power as a vindictive Creator,”[\[51\]](#) before whose “hideous image”[\[52\]](#) they prostrate themselves. The Divine Boy attracts attention partly through being biologically atypical in his youth, robustness, and sexual prodigality, but also by preaching a doctrine that controverts the Puritanism of the reigning dispensation. In a scene that owes much to Nietzsche’s iconoclasm, Stapledon arranges for the Divine Boy to interrupt a service in the central temple of the capital city, where he preaches his gospel of life, denounces the theology of grim power, and smashes the image of the glowering deity. “Not long afterwards,” Stapledon writes, “he was tried for sacrilege and executed.”[\[53\]](#) In his martyrdom, however, the Divine Boy generates a new religion, in which “the race seemed to have been spiritually rejuvenated . . . by widespread fervor.”[\[54\]](#) The Patagonians experience a “golden age.”[\[55\]](#) The episode corresponds in structure to a myth, as understood in a Girardian sense. The society finds itself in a crisis (its indolence); a pre-differentiated sport appears whose difference polarizes the community; roused from its torpor, the community murders the sport; and the murder stimulates revivification through a “new religion.”[\[56\]](#) Stapledon nevertheless consciously de-mythifies his own myth by making the generative mechanism in it transparent. He eliminates any supernatural element.

In *Speaking for the Future* (1994), Stapledon’s biographer Robert Crossley compares *Last and First Men* with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. “With its cyclical structure and emphasis on loss and consolation,” Crossley writes, “*Last and First Men* is a renovated *Paradise Lost*: a story of human paradise repeatedly lost and regained and ultimately lost for good, but with the Miltonic theology edited out.”[\[57\]](#) Crossley describes the relation of *Last Men in London* to its prequel as follows: “In each the future speaks to the present through an apparent fiction generated by telepathic contact between a last man and one of the first men.”[\[58\]](#) Otherwise *Last Men in London* differs noticeably from *Last and First Men* in being focused on a named protagonist, the young Paul, whose individual life-story reflects Stapledon’s own. Through Paul, as Crossley writes, “Stapledon remembers his own past but observes it as if it happened to someone else.”[\[59\]](#) Interspersed with Paul’s story are episodes set in the far-futural Neptunian world of the Eighteenth Men, including accounts of their temporal research project. Crossley remarks that, “Stapledon may have been drawn to the Biblical

name of Paul because of its association with a profound conversion in which an old identity (Saul's) was shed and a new one awakened in its place."[\[60\]](#) Paul indeed acquires a consciousness—and a *conscience*—developed beyond what Stapledon regards as the norm of the (deficient) Twentieth-Century moral disposition. Morality is important to Stapledon's theory of consciousness. Stapledon, who served the Ambulance Corps as a conscientious objector in WWI, identified consciousness with moral conscience. The latter must come into being with the former. The mere ability to calculate does not bespeak humanity.

Chapter V of *Last Men in London* bears the title "Origins of the European War." In it, Stapledon's narrator discusses the Great War of 1914-1918, during which Paul, like his author, had served as an ambulance driver on the Western Front. A superficial commentary would trace the war to events immediately preceding it, the narrator says; but the outburst of continental violence has roots much deeper than those. "The Neptunian observer . . . finds the explanation of your mutual slaughter by regarding it as a crucial incident in the long-drawn-out spiritual drama of your species."[\[61\]](#) This exploration has embraced "all the stages in the awakening of man out of his ape-like forerunner" and has reached back to "the generations of man's pre-simian ancestors."[\[62\]](#) The narrator explains that this research especially seeks out individuals whose mental development exceeds in some degree, however small, that of their co-specifics; he makes the important statement that some of these individuals have proven themselves capable of "handing on their achievement to the future."[\[63\]](#) The most hopeful, and yet tragic, of these discoveries, however, concerns not any direct ancestor of the human line, but rather a collateral species, whom the narrator refers to as *the philosophical lemurs*. The particular achievement of these lemurs consisted in their eventual acquisition of an "inward self-knowledge," acute in type, and the application of their heightened intelligence to "desires and fears."[\[64\]](#) Stapledon might seem to assimilate these details to a Standard Darwinian Process. He describes how "fortune favored this race" and how "as the years passed in tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands it produced large individuals with much larger brains," as though duration by itself might provoke the eruption of consciousness, culture, and representation.[\[65\]](#) Nevertheless the eons with their "happy mutations" are really only the physiological preparation for a non-physiological or "biologically useless" punctuation.[\[66\]](#)

Consciousness bursts forth among the lemurs as a response to a severe crisis "in an event," as the narrator puts it, "which from the human point of view seems almost miraculous."[\[67\]](#) An *event*. The crisis entails the disintegration of the formerly unified and gregarious racial group "into a confusion of warring tribes, each jealously preserving its own fruit groves and raiding its neighbors," such that "starvation and mutual slaughter began to tell on the nerves of this highly strung race."[\[68\]](#) The anxiety of the situation provokes an epochal undertaking by "a certain remarkable female, the supreme genius of her race," who alleviates the crisis, in effect, by instigating language.[\[69\]](#) There is a certain degree of Rousseauian confusion in Stapledon's scenario. He writes, for example, that the female "organized a truce" and made a "concourse of . . . the tribes in a forest glade."[\[70\]](#) In

Stapledon's telling, however, she invents the *means of organizing a truce and of making a concourse*. She does this by "perform[ing] an amazing pantomime, which might be called the forerunner of all sermons and of all propaganda plays."^[71] She makes herself maximally conspicuous, not only through "dance and ululation," but also by standing next to a heap of appetizing fruit, which no doubt appeals to the aggravated hunger of the onlookers; her combined *scène-de-ballet* and vocal recital "put the spectators into an hypnoidal state of tense observation."^[72] Stapledon's invocation of *tension* acquires significance, especially given that he identifies the "hypnoidal state" with a "revivalist meeting."^[73]

The female first eggs on the urgency of the group to satiate its hunger in the heap of fruit and then, changing the tone of her presentation, conveys to her audience, as Stapledon writes, "her own agony of revulsion from hate . . . her own discovery of profound cravings which had hitherto been ignored."^[74] Her spectators "followed her every movement with unconscious mimicry."^[75] The "prophetess," as Stapledon calls her, "overwhelmed by emotional strain, succumbed to heart-failure, and thus sealed her gospel with death."^[76] According to the narrator, "seemingly at one stride, the race passed to a level of self-knowledge and mutual loyalty which the first human species was to seek in vain, and which therefore it is not possible for me to describe to you."^[77] The lemurs now possess a "precocious inner life," which they have taken from the performance, as memory.^[78] Stapledon goes on to describe the development of an articulate culture, complete with institutions, that follows from the generative enactment. The lemurs create philosophy and cultivate mystical experience. The narrator asserts that the lemurs were possibly "the only true Christian race that ever existed."^[79] The episode qualifies as tragic in that geological changes connect the island where the lemurs live with the mainland whereupon a less-developed simian race, ancestral to humanity, invades their realm and massacres them. The episode of the lemurs looks back to the episode of the Divine Boy in *Last and First Men*. Like the episode of the Divine Boy, the episode of the lemurs resembles a myth—especially in deriving the pacification of a mob and the emergence of social order from the death of a conspicuous party.

Despite the Rousseauian confusion referred to earlier (Stapledon carelessly suggests that what the culture-giver must needs invent already exists), the dense little story envisions nothing less than the scenic origin of language, consciousness, and culture. Stapledon omits to emphasize the linguistic element of his scene, but the wailing and swaying of the prophetess, fixing attention and inspiring imitation as they do, correspond to a primordial *Logos*. The second phase of the female lemur's performance exerts an apotropaic force that prevents the hungry mob from appropriating an appetitive object, the heap of fruit. The gesture may be said to redirect appetite from the horizontal, this-worldly axis to a vertical-transcendental axis where the collective contemplation of a mental image temporarily suspends a physiological craving. One might as well say that the gesture aborts an impulse of appropriation exacerbated by the experience of prolonged scarcity in the food-supply. The

fact that Stapledon uses the words *miracle* and *miraculous* several times to characterize the event shores up his other description of it as the sudden inauguration of significance or representation that breaks the dominance of instinct and defers an incipient violence. From the suspension of appetitive bellicosity a “self-conscious sociality” and a “stationary social order” spontaneously arise.[80] The female lemur’s performance generates an “aesthetic relish of acrobatics and of visual perception.”[81] Stapledon’s originary sign thus participates in—or creates—the concept of beauty. Stapledon’s sign, in that it produces temporal iterations, qualifies itself as reproducible. Art is ritual, after all, and ritual is repetition. Stapledon’s scene, as distinguished from his sign, contains the element of *firstness*. The group requires a model that it might imitate, if it would avoid self-annihilation. The prophetess furnishes that model. She is *the first*. Given all of this, one can excuse Stapledon’s self-contradictory diction of *unconscious mimicry*. One might put it down as merely an item of verbal carelessness whose fascinating larger context excuses it.

In the panoply of *scenes* in *The Scenic Imagination*, which one does Stapledon’s scene in *Last Men in London* most resemble? The answer would be that it lies, in resemblance, between that of René Girard and that of Gans himself. Girard’s scene requires a victim, who need only possess some minimal distinguishing feature allowing him to be singled out during the *mêlée* or sacrificial crisis. As Girard writes in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (English version 1987), “the most elementary form of the victimage mechanism, prior to the emergence of the sign, should be seen as an exceptionally powerful means of creating a new degree of attention, the first non-instinctual attention.”[82] Moreover, “since the victim is a common victim it will be at that instant [of its murder] the focal point for all members of the community.”[83] In the newly awakened collective perception, the cadaver becomes a *transcendental signifier*, the representation of an intervening supernatural force or being. Stapledon’s event corresponds in no little degree to Girard’s paradigm, except that that crowd, at war with itself, never *produces* the central figure; rather it is she, rather implausibly, who *produces herself*. Yet the inclusion of her death in the scenario certainly makes of the prophetess a quasi-victimary figure. While the Girardian scene presupposes internecine conflict, the object of contention in that conflict goes missing as violence increases. Stapledon, in his heap of tempting apples, furnishes his scene with an element also found in the Gansian originary scene—the object of appetitive interest which, in the deferral of its appropriation, becomes the metaphysical representation of a desire. Of course, Stapledon’s scene exists only as a brief *fabliau*; he never makes it the basis of an articulate theory, but only passes once again, having narrated it, into his larger narrative.

The question poses itself as to why, in the frustrating prose of Stapledon’s non-fiction, the theme of *origin* fails to appear, whereas it does appear, if only in passing, and yet vividly, in one of his epic fictions. In *The Scenic Imagination*, Gans speculates that the disappearance of origin theories in modern discourse has to do with the Enlightenment assumption that the model of language is the declarative or propositional utterance. The writer of *Waking World*

is not to be identified entirely with the Enlightenment, but a number of Enlightenment assumptions tend to structure his thought. He takes the view, as pointed out earlier, of a rationalist, more or less, and in many ways of a materialist, although not entirely. The writer of *Last and First Men* and *Last Men in London*, on the other hand, occupies the station of a visionary or seer. According to Stapledon, *Last and First Men* revealed itself to him entire as, from a cliff top overlooking the Atlantic, he contemplated a pack of seals sunning themselves on a rock jutting up from the waters—and he then spent several years writing out what had flashed on his consciousness. When he wrote his fictions, Stapledon ceased being rigorously professorial and, therefore, strictly propositional. He began to think in symbols, in an inspired mood of extravagant mythopoeia. He also began to think more humanly. *Waking World* consists in abstract argument. *Last and First Men* and *Last Men in London* consist in mystic contemplation of the overwhelming problem of violence, which Stapledon had experienced at first hand during the Great War, and which obsessed him throughout his life. It is significant that *Last and First Men* and *Last Men in London* are time-travel stories, in which men of the future probe as deeply as possible into the past of their evolution. As the opening paragraph of this essay suggests, the backwards time-traveler is bound to encounter the first utterance.

Notes

[1] Gans, Eric: *Scenic Imagination – Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day*, Stanford University Press, 2008, 1.

[2] 2.

[3] 2.

[4] 2.

[5] 3.

[6] 3.

[7] 4.

[8] 169.

[9] 171.

[10] In German at

<http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Spengler,+Oswald/Reden+und+Aufs%C3%A4tze/Heraklit>. (Translation mine, TFB)

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Fahrenkopf, John: *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2001, 17.

[13] 17.

[14] 22.

[15] Spengler, Oswald, *Decline of the West*, Vol. II, New York, Knopf, 1926, 114.

[16] 114.

[17] 114.

[18] 114.

[19] 114.

[20] 115.

[21] 115.

[22] *Man and Technics*, 43.

[23] 43.

[24] *Decline*, Vol. II, 115.

[25] 115.

[26] 115.

[27] 116.

[28] 116.

[29] 138.

[30] 139.

[31] 140.

[32] 140.

[33] 140.

[34] 141, 143.

[35] 116-117.

[36] 117.

[37] 117.

[38] *Man and Technics*, 42.

[39] 42.

[40] 42.

[41] 48.

[42] 51.

[43] 50.

[44] 49.

[45] *Scenic Imagination*, 150.

[46] Stapledon, Olaf: *Waking World*, London, Methuen, 1934, 7.

[47] 183.

[48] 184.

[49] 191.

[50] Stapledon, Olaf: *Last and First Men and Star Maker*, Mineola, NY, Dover, 1968, 13.

[51] 80.

[52] 81.

[53] 83.

[54] 83.

[55] 83.

[56] 83.

[57] Crossley, Robert: *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future*, Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1994, 189.

[58] 198.

[59] 199.

[60] 200.

[61] Stapledon, Olaf: *Last Men in London*, London, Magnum Books, 1978, 123.

[62] 124.

[63] 125.

[64] 124.

[65] 125.

[66] 125.

[67] 126.

[68] 6.

[69] 126.

[70] 126.

[71] 126.

[72] 126.

[73] 126.

[74] 126.

[75] 126.

[76] 126.

[77] 126.

[78] 126.

[\[79\]](#) 127.

[\[80\]](#) 127.

[\[81\]](#) 127.

[\[82\]](#) Girard, René: *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford University Press, 1978, 99.

[\[83\]](#) 99.