WORLDS OF FREEDOM AND UNFREEDOM: THE TOTALITARIAN IMAGINARIES OF LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON'S *GAY HUNTER* AND ANTONI SŁONIMSKI'S *TWO ENDS OF THE WORLD*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the visions of totalitarian futures in two works written in the interwar period, namely Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Gay Hunter* (1934) and Antoni Słonimski's *Two Ends of the World* (1937). In both novels, the rise of Fascism, supported by the use of advanced technologies, is shown as directly responsible for the destruction of the known world and for the suppression of individual and collective freedom. While addressing the rise of totalitarianism, both authors also envision humanity's return to a more primitive state, however, for different purposes. This paper, therefore, explores the intersections as well as differences in the authors' perceptions of modernity, progress, civilisation and primitivism, as crucial to their extrapolations of humankind's destiny.

Keywords: Totalitarianism; primitivism; Darwinism; utopia; dystopia.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a representação de futuros totalitários em duas obras escritas no período entre-guerras, *Gay Hunter* de Lewis Grassic Gibbon (1934) e *Dois Fins do Mundo* de Antoni Słonimski (1937). Nos dois romances, a ascensão do Fascismo, apoiada no uso de tecnologia avançada, mostra-se diretamente responsável pela destruição do mundo conhecido e pela supressão da liberdade individual e coletiva. Ao mesmo tempo que abordam a ascensão do totalitarismo, ambos os autores imaginam o regresso da Humanidade a um estado mais primitivo, ainda que com propósitos distintos. Este artigo explora, portanto, as intersecções bem como as diferenças das percepções que os autores têm da modernidade, do progresso, da civilização e do primitivismo, como aspetos cruciais à extrapolação do destino da Humanidade.

Palavras-chave: Totalitarismo; primitivismo; darwinismo; utopia; distopia

I

Across Europe, the interbellum period witnessed the development of literature along many strands covered by the label of Modernism. Those were the years of the modern Scottish Renaissance, which intended to regenerate national identity while reconnecting it with the international literary scene (see McCulloch, 2009: 1-8). In Poland, which regained independence after 123 years of partition, the early Modernism of the "Young Poland" period (c. 1890-1918), with its propensity for symbolism, neo-romanticism and decadence (see Milosz, 1969: 322-329), gave way to new tendencies after WWI, which advocated vitalism, optimism and fascination with everyday life (see Kowalczykowa, 2004).

However, interbellum authors both in Scotland and in Poland could not but notice the dangers of totalitarianism connected with the rise of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany. Equally preoccupying was the threat of Communism represented by Soviet Russia. The sense of political instability and danger connected with the premonition of a new war looming on the horizon added to the pessimism of the 1930s, already aggravated by the hardships of the Great Depression and by the overwhelming feeling of civilisational crisis. Modernity was increasingly seen in literature through a catastrophic lens[1]. Unsurprisingly, the interbellum is also an era of great totalitarian dystopias such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*, a trend which eventually culminated in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

This article analyses two such apocalyptic responses to the totalitarian depictions of "modernity", Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Gay Hunter* (1934) and Antoni Słonimski's *Two Ends of the World* (*Dwa Końce Świata*, 1937), which show the annihilation of humanity as directly resulting from the rise of Fascism and the use of modern technologies. The two works, written around the same time at two geographical extremes of the European continent, and

[1] On the changing mood in Polish literature between 1918 and 1939, and its apocalyptic and macabre tenor in the 1930s, see the chapter "Independent Poland 1918-1939" in Czeslaw Milosz's *The History of Polish Literature* (1969).

thus in different social and political circumstances, become involved in a dialogue and a polemic with the visions of the future offered by speculative writers of the era like H. G. Wells and Aldous Huxley, reflecting on the direction in which European civilisation was supposed to be heading. While addressing the rise of totalitarian ideologies and its dystopian ramifications, both Gibbon and Słonimski depict humanity's return to a pre-historic, primitive state; however, they interpret this civilisational regress in different ways. The article thus explores the intersections of themes and literary and philosophical inspirations between the two works, as well as differences in the authors' perceptions of modernity, civilisation, progress and primitivism, as crucial to their respective presentations of what humankind's destiny might or should be.

II

James Leslie Mitchell, better known by his penname Lewis Grassic Gibbon[2], was an advocate of the diffusionist theory, promoted by such anthropologists and writers as William Perry, William Rivers, Harold Massingham, and especially Professor Grafton Elliot Smith from London University, whose *Human History* (1930) was a revelation to Gibbon. The diffusionists believed that primitive humans lived in a kind of Golden Age, they were nomadic hunter-gatherers, not settled food producers. They were not constrained by laws and they needed no laws, because in their innocent primitive condition, humans were naturally kind, generous and sociable. As there was no idea of the state, there was no government. Primitive man had no religion and therefore no externally imposed moral code, no taboo, no sense of sin and no propensity for violence. According to the aforementioned theory, man lived in this condition for thousands of years until the accidental discovery of agriculture in ancient Egypt. It was there and then that civilisation began, forcing former nomads into a settled

[2] In this article I use Mitchell's penname, Gibbon, as the one commonly used in the scholarship devoted to his works, even though he published *Gay Hunter* under his real name.

lifestyle, subjecting them to the authority of government, religion and social hierarchies. As this civilisation spread (or diffused) around the world, it also made wars inevitable (Young, 2004: 419; cf. Gibbon and MacDiarmid, 1934: 18). Such nostalgic longings for a primitivist, almost Rousseauian utopia were criticised by Gibbon's contemporaries and have now been largely discredited in anthropology (see Idle, 1999: 259-260), yet they explain why Gibbon, avowedly not a primitivist himself (see Gibbon and MacDiarmid, 1934: 245), regarded civilisation as evil[3].

Interestingly, as Jeremy Idle notes, Gibbon believed that modernity, understood as the irreverent and rebellious twentieth century, should wipe out everything that preceded it – much in the vein of the Italian Futurists, who wanted to destroy museums, libraries, and academies, or like theorists of early Modernism (e.g. T. E. Hulme) who postulated the destruction of all poetry that was more than twenty years old (Idle, 1999: 258, 260). The annihilation of the old, as Gibbon thought, would give birth to a new, different, civilisation. Such sentiments are visible in Gibbon's novels and essays, e.g. *The Thirteenth Disciple*, in which he depicts the nineteenth century going up in flames, or in "Aberdeen", in which he envisions the destruction of sixteenth-century city parts which speak of suffering, death and ignorance, shadowed by cheerless Calvinism, as opposed to "the glinting, flinting structures that tower new-built up Union Street" (Gibbon and MacDiarmid, 1934: 209; cf. Idle, 1999: 261). As will be seen, such sentiments also find their way into *Gay Hunter*.

In *Gay Hunter* (1934), Gibbon uses the time-travel motif borrowed from his literary mentor H. G. Wells, and sends a young female American anthropologist, the eponymous Gay Hunter, on a dream trip from the 1930s to a far distant future in which the use of destructive technologies has brought

[3] Speculation on the human predicament during a Golden Age, of course, constitutes a long tradition in the imagination of the West. Its bifurcations range from the Garden of Eden to the Elysian Fields, from Arcadia to the Islands of the Blest, far predating Rousseau. Life in a condition of fullness has also produced the idea of Cockaigne. Such imaginings have been called "the utopia of escape" and "the body utopia" (Sargent, 2010: 12). For more information see: Claeys and Sargent, 1999: 2-3; Claeys, 2011: 17-23 and 29-32; and Kumar, 1991: 2-12.

human civilisation to ruin and the descendants of the survivors live the life of the Cro-Magnon. The primitive world of the future, in line with the author's diffusionist outlook, is one of unfettered freedom, equality and natural morality, uncontaminated by the advanced science, violent ideologies and racist hierarchies of Gay's own times. This idyllic life is eventually threatened by the spectre of Fascism, carried into the future by Gay's fellow time-travellers, Major Ledyard Houghton and his fiancée, Lady Jane Easterling. The Fascist couple want to re-create the ancient civilisation with themselves as masters and the new humans as slaves, a plan which is eventually thwarted by Gay and a group of hunter-gatherers[4].

Significantly, Gay resembles the Cro-Magnon even before she meets them: she says that her teeth are like the teeth of the Cro-Magnon, her bones are big and archaic, in contrast to the reed-like figures fashionable in her days (4), and she likes going around naked (9). Quite naturally, she becomes the mouthpiece for Gibbon's diffusionist views. The opening paragraphs show Gay taking in the sight of the landscape of the Wiltshire Downs, in which the megalithic Stonehenge can be seen in the vicinity of later human creations – Pewsey village, the Netheravon barracks and the Upavon military airfield. The landscape spatializes humanity's historical departure from the freedom, simplicity and peace of the hunting-gathering Golden Age, beginning with the rise of religions, through settled agricultural communities, and ending with modern facilities connected with warfare. The quiet Wiltshire Downs, but for the barracks and airfield, look like "the world of the antique men", inviting diffusionist reflections on Gay's part about the time when the hunters hunted naked and free "with no dream of that which awaited their kind in the deeps of the future" (5). Those reflections are followed by Gay's repeated criticism of modern civilisation as ruthless, militaristic and dehumanizing, humanity's dystopian creation based on all sorts of oppression, in which "[a]ll the poor folk labour[ed] at filthy jobs under the gathering clouds of war and

[4] For a discussion of Gibbon's representation of the totalitarian ideologies of Fascism and Nazism in *Gay Hunter* see Pisarska, 2024: 66-69.

an undreamed tyranny", and "the world was one great pounding machine, pounding the life out of humanity, making it an ant-like slave-crawl on an earth tuned to a dung-hill of its own futilities" (15).

In the novel's present, and indeed in its futuristic projections, the ideologies of Fascism and Nazism are posited as most pernicious and despotic, curbing civil liberties and subordinating human lives and works to the overreaching goals of their respective tyrannies. Meeting Major Houghton for the first time, Gay reflects on the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi persecution of German Communists, and, by implication, of all those who do not conform to the racial and cultural standards of the National-Socialist "utopia" – the people whom Houghton calls "the scum" (13) and the Nazis call the *Untermenschen*. When invited to speculate on the future of the human species, Houghton paints a nationalistic vision of England based on hierarchy, racial purity and moral and cultural regeneration through a return to some vaguely defined original state (conveyed by his repeated use of the word "again"), an ideal which is undermined in the present times by the decadent, denationalising and multicultural forces of Modernism (13)[5]. As such his vision can be seen as an example of what Timothy Snyder calls the *politics of eternity* [original italics], i.e. "a longing for past moments that never really happened […]", erecting "illegible monuments to national victimhood, all of them distant from the present, and all of them equally accessible for manipulation", where "[e]very reference to the past seems to involve an attack by some external enemy upon the purity of the nation" (2017: 121; cf. Riemen, 2018: 26). Implicit in Houghton's ideas is strict control and the subjugation of the human body and spirit within the confines of an ethnically uniform authoritarian state, akin to the Fascist oligarchy, as opposed to the freedom of an individual in a cosmopolitan, liberal and egalitarian community, most

[5] Houghton's vision corresponds with the definition of Fascism as "a politicized and revolutionary form of ultranationalism bent on mobilizing all remaining 'healthy' social and political energies to resist the perceived onslaught of decadence so as to achieve the goal of a regenerated national community. It is a project that involves the rebirth (palingenesis) of both the political system and the social and moral culture that underpins it" (Griffin, 2005: 795).

closely represented by liberal democracy. Ironically, Fascism and Nazism (the two terms seem to be often used interchangeably in the novel), are seen as throwbacks of an earlier, more primitive stage of civilisation, whose savage mentality and irrationality are now supported by modern military technologies. This train of thought can be noticed in Gay's musings on "the beasts and savages of civilisation gathering under the swastika flag" (10). Elsewhere, disgusted with Houghton and his fellow-Fascists, Gay observes that "you couldn't wash off the[ir] foul beliefs and superstitions that came out of the dreary past and equipped them with knives wherewith to cut the throats of all the decent traits in civilisation" (10).

Initially, after her encounter with the primitive people, who call themselves the Folk of the Place, Gay wryly notes the collapse of "the dreams and plans and hopes" (52) of her own century regarding the path that humanity was supposed to follow: "The England of Shakespeare, Newton, Avebury – it had ended in nakedness, brown skins, and a bow…" (53). Such thoughts, however, give way to the perception of the hunters' innate nobility and their truly human, unaffected, deeply physical and moral engagement with the world and other people. Gay is surprised that Rem, one of the hunters, fails to take advantage of the fact that they are alone in the country and does not act towards her like a savage from a pornographic novel, aggressive, cannibalistic and driven by the basest of instincts (59-60). For a while she blames his "unnatural", completely asexual attitude on her own unattractiveness as a woman (62). She soon realises, however, that sexual violence and exploitation have no place among the primitive men of the future: they never impose themselves on another human being, and they kill only in defence or when they hunt for food. Moreover, the sexuality of the new humans is not policed by patriarchal laws, taboos and hypocrisy. It is predicated on spontaneity, freedom, empathy and the equality of the sexes. This state of affairs is contrasted with the oppression of women in Gay's own times, in which they are reduced to breeding machines, as is the case in Fascism and Nazism (15), or they become, their bodies sexualised by conventions and taboos, "doll[s] in the rags of civilisation's clothes", and thus mere objects "for the dreary lust of men" (117).

Gay's findings, therefore, contradict the prevailing conception of natural man as savage. Aggression, just as the calculating and mercenary behaviour of marriageable women of Gay's time, is an unnatural product of her own, savage, civilisation (65). The novel, accordingly, shows Gay's sexual awakening in a world of primeval innocence and unhampered desire. When she finally makes love to Rem, the experience is a liberating one, both for Gay and implicitly for all the women in history whose sensuality has been throttled by the miasmas of patriarchy – "it was as though she were all the starved and cheated women of all time who had mated in shame, inadequately, hemmed in by codes and taboos and shames – she was their justification, in her their dim, sad lives found harbour" (102).

In consequence, Gay begins to notice the superiority of the primitive utopia based on freedom, sympathy and equality to the state of unrealised enslavement and unhappiness of present-day humanity within the confines of a civilisation that was supposed to protect them (a necessary acquiescence that Freud so convincingly describes in his *Civilization and its Discontents*).[6] This contrast between the thriving and liberated future humanity, survivor of the old world of inequality and oppression, and its degraded twentieth-century counterpart, civilisation's waning experiment, is highlighted in the episode presenting Gay's conversation with the Old Singer of the tribe. The aged hunter, "wizened ancient, brown and tough and naked, with his thin gnarled hands and perfect teeth, lithe and compact", is contrasted with the old man Gay once saw outside Paddington Station – a "battered old man with a face like a decaying fungus, green and horrible", in whose eyes she saw only "hopeless fear and death". "That was what it had meant for the masses of the people since they built the first Pyramid," observes Gay, "– toil and taboos and a slimy death" (80). It is no wonder, therefore, that Gay regards the new humans as "the freest and finest people [she has] ever met" (154) and refuses to participate in Houghton and Jane's plans to colonise and enslave them.

[6] For details see Freud, 1981: 95ff.

However, the old world of masters and slaves threatens to make a comeback when Major Houghton and Lady Jane lay their hands on ancient technologies and enslave some of the Folk[7] after poisoning their minds with the Evil Song of the Voices, i.e. the promises of a better, safer and easier life, in short with "the madness of civilisation" (106). Those powerful "ghostly fetters from the past", Gay muses, can affect even the minds of the innocent dwellers of future Arcadia, who mistake them for "guiding links to freedom" (114), a conclusion which reflects the belief held by generations of (anti-)utopian authors from Swift to Golding and beyond about the corruptibility of human nature. The diseased dreams of power and progress, which brought down the old world, have been forgotten by the survivors of the global cataclysm, making it possible for them to create a life of freedom and innocence in which new dreams are dreamt, new paths envisioned by purified humanity, in oblivion of its oppressive and degenerate prehistory (106-107). The far-future world is a place of utopian possibility, mapped by the mental evolution of humankind disconnected from its biological past, a species which in its aims and desires is seen as completely distinct from twentieth-century hominids. The primitive utopia of the future is therefore predicated on the transformation of the psyche, not only its physical environment or bodily form. It is a Rousseauian eupsychia, "an optimum state of consciousness", where the "perfectly autonomous, fulfilled" individual I is integrated with the organic and united communal I (Manuel, 1978: 2), living in the state of nature.

It is this newly emergent individual and collective mind, free of civilisational sins and atavisms, which is endangered when Houghton and Lady Jane lure some of the hunters into subjection with their old promises, bringing again humanity's Fall from grace, which is noticeable in the shame of the slaves regarding their own nakedness. Meaningfully, the new Fascist masters

[7] Lyall notes an unintended connection of "Folk" with the German "Volk", in the context of the novel warning against Nazism (2015: 132). The connection is surely relevant, as is, presumably, the etymology of the word "slave", which connects a condition of social inferiority and lack of freedom with the Slavonic peoples.

establish their headquarters in The Shining Place (i.e. ancient London), a deserted metropolis of one of the Hierarchies – the highly advanced states of the Fascist Federation from centuries before – in which the racial elites once subjugated, mistreated and exploited the eugenically bred Sub-Men, "the ancient Lowly" (87). The war between the Hierarchies and the Sub-Men, about which Gay learns from a recording left to posterity, "signifies the conflict of total politics of the 1930s – fascism and communism – projected into the future" (Lyall, 2015: 131-2), and the Sub-Men's final rebellion against their oppressors results in the complete destruction of the then civilisation in an atomic war. Likewise, the Fascist utopia of Houghton and Lady Jane, which revives all the Fascist horrors of the previous centuries, is destroyed at the end of the novel in an almost biblical twist, first by an explosion, like the Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (175), and then by a flood, obliterating Fascism's Satanic threat to the Folk's Edenic freedom and innocence.

III

If Gibbon postulates humankind's salvation in its return to the untainted innocence and freedom of the early Homo sapiens, Antoni Słonimski explicitly rules out this possibility. Written in response to Huxley's *Brave New World*, which Słonimski saw as an attack on progress and as a vindication of primitive forces (Mazan, 1975: 84; see also Słonimski, 1956: 302-305), *Two Ends of the World* presents technological development and humanity's return to nature as equally terrifying options (Mazan, 1975: 86). Set in the year 1950, the story shows the annihilation of humanity by means of Blue Rays, a highly advanced weapon of mass destruction operated by Hans Retlich, a hyper-Fascist, who wants to restore humans to their primitive origins. For this purpose he preserves only a selected group of young people called Rubenites (from the name of his estate Ruben in Denmark), conditioned from infancy to a life of brutality and discipline. However, a few specimens of old humanity remain and they become carriers of pre-apocalyptic values and attitudes, while the new world becomes a battleground between the extremes of Fascism and Communism.

The novel is set in 1950 but the world it extrapolates is virtually the world of the 1930s. Hitler, Goering, Il Duce and Stalin are still alive, so is the League of Nations, sluggish and ineffective as usual. The name of Retlich is a quasi-anagram of Hitler (see Mazan, 1975: 85), and both their careers and the states they create bear a number of similarities. Interestingly, Retlich is also a former member of the Nazi Party and the former commandant of a concentration camp. The aesthetics of Retlich's camp at Ruben have a lot in common with the aesthetics of Hitler's Nazi state: a blend of Germanic and ancient Roman elements, with black spiders (like black swastikas) on the Rubenite banners (81, 89). Moreover, Retlich's new society is a male comitatus, in which the sexual drive is supposed to be sublimated into an intimate relation with the leader, while the woman's only role is to give birth to new male worshippers (90).[8]

On a deeper level, Słonimski's book is a Darwinist satire which interrogates humankind's position in the evolutionary scheme, and poses questions about the nature of humanity and about what it is that makes us different from brute beasts. It is not surprising, therefore, that his novel directly refers to and resonates with the ideas and works of those utopian authors in which evolution, eugenics and the hierarchy of species constitute major themes. H. G. Wells, Karel Čapek, Aldous Huxley and George Bernard Shaw provide an imaginative context for Słonimski's satirical vision. Moreover, Darwinism, whether biological or social, is inextricably linked in Słonimski's novel with the ideology of Fascism, which presupposes, as Retlich notes, "a regression to earlier life forms and a renunciation of humanitarianism as an element weakening the conquering spirit and force" (35)[9].

Retlich's ideas clearly resonate with the cultural primitivism underpinning the respective versions of Italian and German Fascism and their cult of violence. As noted by George Boas:

[8] Compare Susan Sontag's views on body, gender and aesthetics in Fascism (1981: 89-93).

[9] All translations from Polish are mine.

> The emphasis upon leadership, that which was later to be called by the Nazis the *Führerprinzip*, was a throwback to the model of the horde governed by the will of a strong man. Mussolini emphasized the need for strength and power. Bitterly opposed to any form of humanitarianism, a kind of neo-Darwinism was his ideal. Man was a superior form of ape and must remember this.
> (1973: 597)

In Retlich's new world, this precept is taken literally as humankind's evolutionary step back: humans should be made to resemble their immediate animal ancestors, i.e. apes, to abandon their upright position and instead walk on all fours. Humankind's post-apocalyptic purification leads through brutalisation and subjection to evolutionary mechanisms. The struggle for survival and the law of the jungle are reflected in Retlich's new Decalogue, which promotes blunt and brutal force and the exploitation of one person by another (19). They will "fight tooth and nail for their lives" (37), states Retlich, who makes the Rubenites' living conditions as difficult and primitive as possible. The Blue Rays kill all creatures with more advanced nervous systems, which includes higher taxonomic divisions from amphibians to mammals. However, in his ark at Ruben, Retlich preserves major animal predators, venomous species and parasites (35), which serve as man's natural enemies. In the same manner, he forbids all technology, medical inventions, more complicated weapons and even everyday tools, which fall into the category of "Life made easy" – the Rubenites fight with sticks and maces, and open coconuts and cans with their nails or with stones (52).

Other important elements of the Rubenites' devolved condition are ignorance, lack of self-awareness and the atrophy of all higher feelings and pursuits. Even though the choice of boys and girls is determined by "racial criteria", Retlich, as opposed to the Nazis, does not choose the Nordic race, as it has too much predisposition to humour, "one of the greatest anarchic forces of the old world" (35). Instead, he chooses Laps, allegedly "the saddest people on earth" (35). Religion is also dangerous because it makes one raise one's head to the stars and from there it is only a stone's throw away from

art and dreaming, this Jewish invention (17), a creativity divorced from "accuracy and purposefulness", which is Retlich's motto. Moreover, affecting human emotions, art introduces an element of unpredictability and chaos – a lesson learnt from Plato – just as nature is unpredictable in its evolutionary preferences of preservation and elimination. That is why Retlich regards Fascism and Nazism as half-measures, as you can trust no one – even Hitler may all of a sudden become religious and start singing French songs because every human being carries inside the seeds of civilisational malaise (19). Old humanity has to be eliminated *in toto* to make sure that the disease has been extirpated. Only what he deems worthy of preservation will be preserved and the new humanity has to be methodically "created". Retlich becomes such a Creator, a new God the Father, from whose gardens at Ruben, as if from Eden, will come new uncorrupted Adams. In this context, the name of the strongest Rubenite, Yar, acquires a new significance – "Yar" read backwards is "Raj", i.e. "paradise" in Polish (cf. Mazan, 1975: 90).

Trying to control nature, Retlich resorts to eugenics and conditioning. The children he chooses are all colour-blind and descended from tone-deaf parents; therefore, they are allegedly "insensitive to a filth called art" (17). The words "beautiful" and "ugly" are struck out of language and replaced by "useful" and "useless", utilitarianism instead of aesthetics, a policy which resonates not only with the manipulation of the language for the purposes of the official propaganda[10] but also with the elimination of purpose-less activities (e.g. art for art's sake) in totalitarian states like Nazi Germany (Arendt, 1973: 322). Raising one's head is severely punished and the Rubenites are to live in caves because the ceiling forms a barrier between the head and the sky and forces a person to bend and walk on all fours. As the inheritors of the earth the Rubenites are denied all scientific inventions that would ensure their domination as a species because it would imply teaching them, and teaching would "infect their pure and virtuous psyche with the miasmas of beliefs and desires, and push this undisturbed stream of blood [again] into the madness

[10] For details on the language of the Third Reich see Klemperer, 2013.

of art and Communism" (37). Ignorant, brutish and cruel, and very literally returned to nature, the Rubenites must be protected against this pernicious influence, so Retlich also decides to destroy all the remnants of civilisation such as books, paintings, statues and all technological achievements[11].

Retlich's implementation of his deterministic and mechanistic worldview puts an end to the long and arduous rise of consciousness – intellectual and moral – among the cycles of progress and regression. As noted by the narrator: "A mysterious force of destinies, laboriously pushing the human species forward, ended in a disaster" (30), which brings to mind Bergson's concept of "creative evolution" and of the élan vital, a force behind the development of all life, and all creative and artistic activity of humankind. However, nature and its uncontrollable forces, Bergson's vital impetus, prevail in the end, first, in the accidental survival of a handful of old humans, and second, in the awakening of the Rubenites as a result of a simple dance performed by Zina, an Italian Roma girl, which leads to Yar's rebellion against Retlich and the eventual killing of the dictator.

Interestingly, arguing against humanity's return to nature, Słonimski resorts to one of the major myths of literature, namely *Robinson Crusoe*, which praises human resourcefulness and expresses faith in the benefits of civilisation. Henryk Szwalba, one of the survivors of the Blue Ray apocalypse, is referred to as a Warsaw Robinson, while Warsaw is compared to a sunken ship or a desert island (see 43, 71-2). Encumbered with the goods salvaged from shops and libraries, he resembles Robinson from illustrations in children's books (44), he only needs a parrot and an umbrella. His yearning for another human being, his Friday, as the narrator puts it, is fulfilled when he

[11] Preventing the unfettered cultural growth of the Rubenites, Retlich also restricts their freedom to privacy. Following the best totalitarian traditions, his hyper-Fascism obliterates the boundary between private and public life (see Arendt, 1973: 338-339), which is shown as both disturbing and grotesque. Solitude is a crime, therefore, the Rubenites have to always stay together, even when using the toilets (53). Moreover, the system of collectivist life, devised by Retlich, encourages mutual surveillance and informing on one another for personal benefit and rewards (52).

meets Chomiak – not a man-eater but a sausage-eater (55) – who is hardly a noble savage, rather a true savage, a Warsaw con man, aggressive, carnal and opportunistic. At first Szwalba is convinced of his civilising mission with respect to Chomiak: "'Now I have an obligation to look after my companion in misery. I must eradicate his drinking habit, I must educate him and introduce him to the world of beauty', ambitiously deliberated Robinson, listening to the mighty snoring of his Friday" (64), but Chomiak's education is virtually lost on him. Szwalba and Chomiak represent respectively the perennial duality of reason and instinct: Szwalba escapes into the world of literature and art while Chomiak indulges his appetites, and Szwalba's lack of sexual temperament is contrasted with Chomiak's overblown libido (72). Being an opportunist, Chomiak is also better at adaptation to new circumstances, which guarantees his evolutionary success – he establishes an immediate rapport with the Rubenite rebels led by Yar and at the end of the novel he is the first to follow the new humans to wherever they intend to go (cf. Wyka, 1989: 39).

In the character of Szwalba, Słonimski represents a passage between two extremes in thinking about human nature and its destiny. Initially, Szwalba believes that people can be changed for the better by science and art; that they can be ennobled by knowledge, beauty and progress. He awaits Socialism free of violence and terror; he regards hatred as a curable disease in a species which is still very young, and which will eventually turn to "justice, freedom and peace" (45). Szwalba's initial faith in humankind's intellectual and moral perfectibility gives way to utter disillusionment. From Szwalba's perspective, humanity's return to the state of nature is a return to some earlier evolutionary stage, but far more primeval than Retlich's intended regression to apes. Humans have jumped back several taxonomic divisions and at least one extinction event, and the world is now returned to the era of dinosaurs – "reptiles or Archaeopteryxes "(45) – only disguised as the Homo sapiens. Szwalba's reflections anticipate the concept of the triune brain, developed by Paul D. MacLean in the 1960s. According to this theory, the human brain consists of three complexes: reptilian, responsible for instinctual behaviour involved in homing, mating, territoriality and

aggressive display; paleomammalian, responsible for emotion and motivation governing feeding, reproduction and parenting; and neomamalian, which makes it possible for humans to speak, write, learn and solve problems (for details see MacLean, 1990: 15-17). Szwalba comes to realise that he was always wrong about humanity: the reptilian brain worked insidiously under cover of higher mammalian and strictly human motivations, and the world destroyed by Retlich, a world of injustice, exploitation, war and all kinds of suffering, was a direct consequence of humanity never really being human but beastly (46-47). If Retlich kills old humankind because of its departure from its natural beastly heritage, Szwalba condemns it for never having attained a fully human condition, free of violent atavisms. Szwalba notices the same mistakes and perversions in Yar's behaviour as happened before: a product of Retlich's hyper-Fascism, Yar creates Communism (with a recognisable Bolshevik face), with its various abuses and horrors: collectivism, stifling bureaucracy, terror, surveillance, arbitrary punishments and show trials (see 110-112). The new humanity, therefore, is merely a continuation of the old world, forever governed by prehistoric beasts, and this "tyranny of nature" can only be resisted through escapism (121).

Ultimately, Szwalba's Darwinist outlook, as Professor Pankhurst, a scientist from Edinburgh and another survivor, points out, amounts to dividing humans into Morlocks and Eloi. The former, brutish and driven by instincts, are bound to survive, while the latter, peaceful and given to intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, are doomed to die, as they are too weak without the support of a civilised society and its various protective mechanisms. They are like mistletoe, in Szwalba's opinion, they live only as long as the tree (i.e. civilisation) which makes their life possible (112). Professor Pankhurst follows Yar and his company, hopeful about the possibility of creating a better world, in which humanity will again "look to the stars […] and find elation in word, colour and sound", and in which "human thought will again build the edifice of knowledge" (120). He wants to actively contribute to the progress of the new humanity, to restrain savagery and ignorance, and bring forth the era of peace and love (120). Pankhurst's utopian hope and involvement are contrasted with Szwalba's disillusionment and withdrawal

into the world of art and literature, as he stays behind, in the desert island of Warsaw, all alone.

As such, Pankhurst's and Szwalba's respective attitudes can be defined – if somewhat simplistically – in terms of positive and negative types of freedom, as conceptualised by Isaiah Berlin in his seminal 1998 essay "Two Concepts of Liberty". In the circumstances that exist, Pankhurst exercises his freedom *to* – "to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes", to be "a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if [he] were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of [his] own and realising them" (1998: 203). Szwalba, on the other hand, represents freedom *from* – from coercion, from any arbitrary interference, by people or institutions, with his life and actions, a freedom which is in principle individualistic, and which lies at the foundation of individual rights and civil liberties (1998: 194, 200).

IV

Written in the same decade and permeated with the same fears of a looming war, the works of Gibbon and Słonimski present nature (understood as the world of living things and as the basic character of humanity) and civilisation as crucial to their respective totalitarian imaginaries. Gibbon's primitives have no history and no memory of the old world, an oblivion which is a utopian blessing. The primitive hunters stand for an ideal of moral life and communal spirit, and reflect Gibbon's own faith in man's innate goodness. Humanity's return to nature is therefore seen as an opportunity to recover our true uncorrupted nature of pure and noble desires and motivations, a quality which Gibbon sees as necessary to bringing forth a new world of freedom, justice, equality and peace – it involves the return to a time beyond history in order to change the course of history. In Gibbon, therefore, the vector of human perfectibility goes backward to biological and pre-civilisation origins, implying the re-awakening of the Cro-Magnards in us, even though, as he writes elsewhere, "human nature go[es] into an underground pit for a million years" (1986: 254). In Słonimski's novel, in contrast, humanity's return to

nature is presented as a Darwinist nightmare, in which all the creations of human genius are lost and the true human nature, forever savage and beastly, which has been brewing beneath the thin veneer of civilisation and culture, is liberated and given free rein. Corruption, therefore, is only tangentially connected with civilisation, it is humanity's inherent flaw that infects and is perpetuated by the products of civilisation. Nature is very explicitly contrasted here with expressions of human thought and creativity like art and literature which offer Henryk Szwalba routes of inner exile. Even modern technologies, destructive as they are, are not condemned wholesale by Słonimski, but rather their users – people motivated by "[c]omplexes, big and small, psychological traumas, hormones, [and] secretory glands" which, as Professor Pankhurst points out, have shaped the history of the world (113). Retlich's Rubenites, like Gibbon's primitives, have no history or knowledge of what the old humanity has achieved or what crimes it has perpetrated. They are, in Pankhurst's words, like sticks or boards in a fence not like living trees with leaves and roots, and so, they are bound to build the new world through trial and error, but build they will. Hence, the novel implies that the history of human civilisation is made up of cycles, a Spenglerian notion which is encapsulated in the words allegedly spoken by Aldous Huxley at the beginning of the novel – "the frame of the universe will remain and within this frame nature will again create all its errors and delights" (8).

Surprisingly, however, both authors end on a hopeful note. Gay Hunter wakes up from her post-apocalyptic dream of a primitive utopia and returns to her own times, when "there are still pity and kindliness, humour, love and irony" (184). She can see the cityscape of London, the future Fascist metropolis of her dream, and voices the hope that it "might yet, as in all the world, build [the people] a life that would never know the nightmare of the Hierarchies" (184). However, the nature of a better world remains open. "There are many Songs – this we live, and that which you lived," says Rem, a hunter from the future, with Gay on the verge of wakefulness. "And all are part […] of a greater singing. Even though it may not be with us, you have still your own Song" (180). Equally open is the fate of humanity in Słonimski's novel: the landscape of Warsaw and by implication of the

whole world is an echoing void, and the last sentences describe Szwalba as a primitive man, emaciated and hairy, with his eyes bloodshot from intensive reading. However, he sometimes comes out of his cave to look at the sky on moonlit nights, as if he was waiting for the colourful aeroplanes promised by departing Professor Pankhurst – symbols of humanity's utopian condition that will one day be attained[12].

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[12] In contrast, Marta Wyka reads the ending of the novel in irredeemably pessimistic terms, as the failure of both the individual and civilisation (1989: 41).

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