

## **“The Immense Panorama of Futility and Anarchy”: Conrad and Eliot as Critics of Modernity**

**Tim Havens**

The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was in many ways an era of optimism in the West. For Britain in particular, urbanization, the success of and profits resulting from imperialism, and innovations in science and culture, brought about a sense of societal progress. The public of the time was confident that human nature had allowed society to progress as far as it had and that it would continue to progress. Many held the belief that humanity not only had the potential to better itself, but that it was in the process of doing so at that time.

On the other hand, a handful of thinkers objected to this worldview from the very beginning of the century. Among these nonconformists, writer Joseph Conrad and poet and essayist T. S. Eliot argued that the opinion held by the majority was both naïve and hypocritical. Despite the fact that Conrad wrote the majority of his work prior to World War I while Eliot wrote most of his after the war, the two men exhibit remarkably similar outlooks on the culture around them. Each doubts whether civilization can advance at all; for them, development on an individual, let alone society-wide basis is impossible, and any perceived “progress” must be superficial at best.

Their respective outlooks, of course, did not arise in a vacuum, but rather constituted a rejection of popular values. Conrad’s writings—*Heart of Darkness*, “The Secret Sharer,” and “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’” for example—are notable for their use of the backdrop

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of imperialism and exotic locales in their investigation of the depravity of mankind. His works highlight the savagery of both colonizers and colonized in order to make a statement about the facets of human nature that make progress impossible. Eliot, in contrast, examines the modern British cityscape in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* for evidence of hypocrisy and moral emptiness. The authors include very different settings and cultures in their works, which would imply that the conditions each man describes are fundamentally different; after all, colonial Africa is half a world away from London, the metropole of the British empire. Nevertheless, they arrive at approximately the same conclusion: they both believe, in spite of the popular faith in progress, that human self-improvement is a vain goal. In addition, the two writers refute the assertions of their friends and mentors. Conrad writes of his dissatisfaction with the progressive mindset endorsed by modern society in his correspondence to R. B. Cunninghame Grahame and others, and Eliot’s perspective on modernity seems to directly repudiate the opinions espoused by the likes of Irving Babbitt and George Santayana, his professors at Harvard.

My purpose, then, is to establish the ideological similarity between Conrad and Eliot. Both act as social critics whose writings represent a cynical vision of modern Britain that contradicts the popular sentiments of the time. Although they seem to have had little direct influence on one another and wrote in different parts of the century (that is, before and after the first World War), the authors hold comparable opinions. I intend to explore this clash between a naïve faith in progress and Conrad and Eliot’s sense of skeptical realism. I will examine the specific cultural and literary influences which gave rise to each man’s respective philosophy before analyzing them as they appear in their literary works. Finally, I will describe the subtle yet meaningful ways in which the authors’ prognoses of civilization differ and consider the implications of these differences.

### **The Origins of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Optimism**

The optimism that early 20<sup>th</sup> century Western culture inherited from the Victorian period was not, despite objections by the likes of Eliot and Conrad, unwarranted in the eyes of the public. A number of scientific discoveries and new cultural developments prompted

Europeans—the British among them—to look favorably on modern society as a testament to mankind’s adaptability and capacity for progress. Some of the most significant of these developments (and, when taken as a whole, perhaps the single governing principle behind the public’s confidence in civilization at the time) are the theories of evolution and natural selection.

Darwin’s assertions that conditions in nature necessitate the survival of the fittest members of a species and that living creatures change over time in order to survive are noteworthy from a purely scientific perspective, but are all the more significant because of their implications when applied to humanity. The merger of these two fields—the scientific and the social—resulted in a movement known as social Darwinism, which overturned many traditional beliefs about man’s nature and origins and replaced conventional religious tenets with a sort of popular humanism. Rather than ascribing civilization’s success and well-being to divine law, the public of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century believed that an innate human pursuit of excellence propelled civilization. As Lois A. Cuddy astutely observes, social Darwinism “had wide-ranging implications and reverberations for both individuals and society” during the period in which it was accepted as valid (14). Most notably, faith in the human capacity for achievement and self-betterment replaced traditional virtues informed by religion. Consequently, “[p]eople and science, rather than God(s) [sic], now held the responsibility for the human condition” (Cuddy 14). Given that Western civilization was, in its own estimation, the pinnacle of human progress at the time, this view fostered the belief that humanity could better itself through its own efforts and was in the process of doing so, as evidenced by its achievements and discoveries.

Furthermore, Herbert Spencer’s principle of “survival of the fittest,” which he derived from Darwin’s theories, justified racist views and oppression of “lesser” branches of humanity. While understood to be incorrect by modern standards, this biased view towards non-European cultures was, at the time, considered yet another cause for optimism. The fact that whites were, by virtue of their advanced technology, capable of overpowering less developed cultures was, in the mind of the European public, a sign of their inherent racial superiority. Such an attitude helped to justify the colonization of

Africa, which in turn provided colonizers with the opportunity to force vanquished territories to submit to Western rule. The vast quantity of land acquired by the British in this manner encouraged national pride and further reinforced dedication to progress.

While this expansion was occurring at the periphery of the British Empire, simultaneous developments regarding the standard of living in the metropole directly contributed to the well-being and contentment of those living at home. The Industrial Revolution of the previous century had caused a population movement away from rural parts of Britain and towards cities, so by the early 1900s urbanization had already been underway for some time. The consequences of urbanization, however, were not restricted to population redistribution. On the contrary, the new social structure brought about by shifting demographics prompted (and, in some instances, necessitated) changes in various aspects of daily life. According to modern historian Hartmut Kaelble, class inequality in the period following the Industrial Revolution

was gradually and slightly reduced by the rise in the standard of living, by rising life expectancy, by the declining size of the family, by improvements in housing, by increasing job security, by the development of public social insurance systems covering health, disability, and unemployment, and by the gradual reduction of social differentials among wage earners. (497)

As a response to these changes, thinkers such as Samuel Smiles promoted the idea that anyone could feasibly better his social standing through hard work. In his influential work *Self Help*, Smiles claims that “by dint of persevering application and energy, [many individuals] have raised themselves from the humblest ranks of industry to eminent positions of usefulness and influence in society” and that his audience is capable of following their example and bettering themselves through hard work. *Self Help* was a bestseller; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that his optimism concerning social mobility not only appealed to his Victorian audience, but also informed their decisions and lifestyles to some extent. While it is overly idealistic to assume that every man could improve himself and gain the wealth and prestige he desired through hard work alone, the prospect of upwards social mobility was

a powerful motivator for Westerners to achieve their full potential and perfect themselves to the greatest degree possible.

### **Conrad and Eliot's Ideological Influences**

Within this mostly optimistic, forward-looking culture, some detractors argued that the society to which they belonged was incorrect in declaring itself progressive. Among these naysayers were Irving Babbitt and George Santayana, two of T. S. Eliot's professors at Harvard. While the two men have different opinions concerning the establishment of a social system appropriate for modern times, both conclude that society-wide progress is an impossible ideal. For them, the only feasible means of progress is at the individual level; this sort of self-improvement can only benefit others in that it produces leaders who can stabilize, if not advance, society. Although their viewpoints are not identical to Eliot's later stance on progress, the professors' respective ideologies formed a foundation upon which their pupil developed his own criticism.

To critic Irving Babbitt, "progress" is an empty ideal, representing a shallow sort of improvement. In *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt investigates classical definitions of humanism, noting that there is a marked contrast between the humanist and the humanitarian with regard to notions of progress. The difference, as he sees it, is that humanism is "interested in the perfecting of the individual rather than in schemes for the elevation of mankind as a whole" (8). Whereas the humanitarian seeks to benefit mankind at large, the humanist is "naturally disdainful of the humble and lowly who have not been indoctrinated and disciplined" and considers them worthless to society, favoring only those who are intelligent and who conform to custom (10). Because Babbitt believed that America was dominated by humanitarian thought, he scorned the "progress" he saw unfolding around him, stating sarcastically that "the doubts that beset our minds [about modern morality] can all be conjured away by...the magic word Progress" (64). He considered its aim to "enrich" society, and therefore advocated the college system not as a vehicle for the evolution of human thought, but merely as a means of preventing a regression to a less sophisticated status quo. He lamented the "educational impressionism," or lack of an academic focus, he found in the American college as an unfortunate byproduct of "educational democracy"—the

freedom to pursue one's personal interests and, consequently, a lack of restraint and order in the structure of the institution. The objective of the college, in Babbitt's opinion, is to stand "not for the *advancement*, for but the assimilation of learning, and for the *perpetuation of culture*" (102, emphasis added). Babbitt believed that efforts by students to prove themselves original thinkers and supersede their own professors contradicts one of the central tenets of humanism—to follow tradition and preserve the current body of knowledge. The modern scholar, as a result, "does not...hope to become original by assimilating tradition" as previous thinkers did, "but rather by ignoring it, or...trying to prove that it is mistaken" (233). The trend he observed is a manifestation of the desire for progress; the aforementioned humanitarians believed that by producing new ideas and unprecedented claims, they could contribute to the advancement of human knowledge, but according to Babbitt, such endeavors are vain. Therefore, he deemed the goal of academia to be the conservation of what information already exists, since "meaningful contributions" to human thought on the part of humanitarians are counterproductive.

George Santayana, on the other hand, adopts a humanitarian attitude towards progress and the ideal society in *Reason in Society*, the second volume of his *The Life of Reason*. He encourages the sort of humanitarian altruism that Babbitt, a humanist, rejects, since he believes that "the excellence of societies is measured by what they provide for their members" (53). Santayana argues that the quality of what 20<sup>th</sup> century society provides to the public identifies it as inimical to progress. Emphasis on material goods, considered by many at that time to be an indication of society's progress, is to him a sign of societal decay; advancements in the manufacture of goods without a corresponding development in social theory would lead mankind to be "[nothing] but a trivial, sensuous, superstitious, custom-ridden herd" (127). He does not oppose materialism *per se*, but fears the consequences of a system in which goods are distributed without regard for the laborers who produce them. Although these goods can potentially benefit the public, the means by which they are produced and the disparity between the rich and the poor indicate that material prosperity does not necessarily correspond to improvement. The lot of the wealthy is certainly improved by the goods available to them,

but said goods can only be created at the expense of the laborers who manufacture them. The treatment of laborers as a “herd” of expendable human capital can, in Santayana’s opinion, quite literally reduce them to the status of sub-human cattle (127). If it is true that “the excellence of societies is measured by what they provide for their members,” Western civilization fails to provide the working classes with what they require, much less what they desire (53). As a result, Santayana criticizes industrial society as non-progressive because as a humanitarian, he cannot condone the one-sidedness of the “progress” created by an increase in the supply of material goods for the rich.

For both men, self-improvement is a sort of progress, albeit a type that restricts itself to improving a small portion of society and consequently is not applicable to the general public. However, the roles of these chosen few differ in each thinker’s respective theory. According to Babbitt, intellectuals and scholars should isolate themselves in a society of their own and have little direct contact with mainstream culture, which he believes to be a lost cause. For Santayana, on the other hand, thinkers should become leaders and use their wisdom and talents to guide the human race as a whole towards some semblance of true progress, as opposed to the sort of material “progress” that the society of his time celebrated.

Babbitt and Santayana’s theories differ in a number of ways, and Eliot’s ideas deviate from theirs, but the two professors nevertheless played a significant role in their student’s intellectual development. Like his mentors, Eliot criticizes modern society for naively trusting that progress is possible, but, unlike them, he believes that there is a chance, however small, that civilization can redeem itself through a rediscovery of what truly matters in life.

While he did not receive the formal education that Eliot did, Joseph Conrad’s correspondence with fellow writer R. B. Cunninghame Graham reveals a great deal about the development of his self-generated social and political views. In particular, many of Conrad’s letters to Graham contain clear expressions of his skepticism about human nature, progress, and the general state of society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Conrad’s early letters to Graham reveal a perspective that is present in many of his later works: a lack of faith in civilization’s ability to

progress intellectually, at least as a coherent whole. He asks, for instance, whether education can truly improve the lot of the average Westerner and thereby benefit society at large, noting that knowledge “would enable [the common man] to scheme, and lie, and intrigue his way to the forefront of a crowd no better than himself” (423). To educate him would serve only to make him “conscious—and much smaller—and very unhappy” because, in Conrad’s eyes, such people are ill-equipped to make sense of what they know; therefore, a movement towards education for the general masses is not a vehicle for progress, and may even degrade an already stagnant culture (*Letters* 1: 423). While he had no direct contact with theorists such as Babbitt and Santayana and thus was not influenced by their ideas as Eliot was, Conrad nevertheless espouses views similar to theirs, particularly with respect to reforming the common man.

Unlike the Harvard professors, however, Conrad believes that society-wide progress is utterly impossible, as he explains in a letter to Graham. In his missive, he compares civilization to

a machine...[an] infamous thing that has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart...It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space [sic], pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters. (*Letters* 1: 125)

In this way, the author identifies modern society as an impersonal, self-created and self-perpetuating entity that by its very nature works to the detriment of humanity. Conrad views society, in fact, as “fundamentally criminal” (*Letters* 2: 160) and consequently sees self-interest as the only feature of human nature that holds civilization together. To him, humans are essentially “vicious animals” who succeed not because of altruism, but because of our shared interests and the need for cooperation in order to pursue them (2: 160). Efforts to change this system will, according to Conrad, prove pointless; the *status quo* of Western culture does not allow for deviation from the principles that govern it, so he laments that his is a “lost cause...an idea without a future” (*Letters* 2:161). By communicating these dark visions to Graham, Conrad establishes the ideological background of skepticism for his distrust of progress.



Beyond the notion of the impossibility of progress, Conrad seems to suggest that human existence in itself is futile. In a January 14, 1898 letter to Graham, he claims that “the fate of a humanity condemned utterly to perish from cold is not worth troubling about” (*Letters 2*: 17). He adds in a letter from later in the same month that “what makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, [but] that they are conscious of it” and yet do practically nothing to correct themselves (*Letters 2*: 30). Social reform, then, means little to Conrad, since in his mind, any efforts to change what society has caused are insignificant when compared to the immense number of problems that go unaddressed. He seems to have a lack of faith in society’s ability to amend itself because the problems it faces are too great for one or even several men to conquer. In addition, Conrad considers support of a cause a choice between two (or more) proverbial evils. Despite his initial espousal of Roger Casement’s call for colonial reform in the Belgian Congo, for example, he realizes that to choose to support a cause means that one must embrace it wholeheartedly and thereby become a hypocrite. Even before Casement solicits his help in reforming the Belgian Congo (a cause that Conrad originally supports but later fails to assist), Conrad writes to Graham that “every cause is tainted: and you reject this one, espouse the other one as if it were evil and the other good while the same evil you hate is in both” (*Letters 2*: 25). In other words, his letters to Graham reveal that he is disdainful of reform because the “machine” that is society is impossible to confront or control.

In short, Conrad’s correspondence with Graham sets forth a rather pessimistic worldview that plays a significant role in the plots of his fiction. His opinions on society’s inability to progress and its self-destructive nature find a parallel in Marlow’s disdain for imperialism (for instance), with Kurtz as a representative of the West’s futile attempts to evolve and improve human society. While these themes are apparent in the narratives he writes, Conrad’s letters to Graham substantiate them as his own personal views on early 20<sup>th</sup> century society.

Eliot, although somewhat more hopeful in his outlook, takes a stance on human progress similar to Conrad’s. In *T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Evolution*, Lois J. Cuddy writes that in Eliot’s view, while

“humanity [at the turn of the century] now had greater scientific and industrial knowledge, people were not superior ethically or morally, nor brighter intellectually, nor physically more adept” than they were in classical Greece, the period and setting which he identifies as the model for all subsequent incarnations of Western civilization (20). This notion contrasts Conrad’s belief that mankind cannot progress at all, as it assumes that the Greeks, if no one else, achieved a certain level of accomplishment that has remained unchallenged since then.

Both writers agree that whether civilization has stagnated or not since ancient times, it has certainly not advanced. This is not to say, though, that they see eye-to-eye with respect to the human condition. Eliot, unlike Conrad, believes in the stabilizing force of tradition and asserts that it can hold a society together, even if it cannot improve it. The “oneness of all aspects of human experience” is what he claims to be the unifying principle that prevents humanity from destroying itself (Cuddy 100). This connection can manifest itself in numerous ways; critic Richard Rees argues that for Eliot, religion (that is, after his conversion to Christianity) is the *sine qua non* of culture. Because it acts as a unifying element, religion helps to preserve organized society from decay for as long as a particular religion persists, which explains the (in his opinion) relative stability of Western society since the rise of Christianity. Eliot’s faith in religion as the linchpin of civilization opposes Conrad’s nihilism in that the latter does not allow for any social mechanism that can redeem inherently corrupt human nature. Therefore, Eliot’s prognosis for civilization is slightly more optimistic than Conrad’s. Eliot accepts Christian virtues such as altruism and reform as beneficial to maintaining the social *status quo*. Even in his pre-conversion works such as *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *The Waste Land*, he embraces quintessentially human qualities such as appreciation for art and meaningful conversation as an instrument of stability, whereas Conrad finds little to no cause for confidence that anything will improve. While he considers it unlikely that society will succeed in revitalizing itself, Eliot at least accounts for one means by which mankind can make amends for its past mistakes and work towards a stable, if not perfect, future.

Although Conrad and Eliot hold different attitudes on the potential for society to check itself against deterioration, they share

the same doubt and cynicism concerning the state of humanity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither trusts the popular optimism of the era and its various manifestations in contemporary culture, and they agree that “progress,” while desirable at first glance, actually contributes to the deterioration of Western civilization.

### **Social Decay in Conrad and Eliot**

The two men agree that society is deluding itself due to its faith in progress. They, like other intellectuals of the age, ask whether “‘improvements’ ...really bring ‘happiness’ (however defined) or even contentment” (Altick 109), or if the reverse is true and the process of civilization weakens society from within. Interestingly, they both gauge the extent of social decay by some of the same standards: the deterioration of the modern cityscape and a widespread lack of agency among members of society. It is in these elements of modern life, then, that the negative consequences of progress are the most readily apparent, according to Conrad and Eliot.

### **Cityscapes**

Both authors turn to the cityscape of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to describe the moral and spiritual decay they observe in their society. Since the urban landscape is a manmade environment, its features and overall quality are the responsibility of those who create and maintain it. For this reason, the two writers’ pessimistic examination of various cityscapes is an indirect criticism of the ideals that govern the culture that created them.

Joseph Conrad’s novels generally involve exotic locales instead of traditional Western cities, but his descriptions of urban settings, though few and brief, capture his opinion of the society in which he lived. His descriptions attest to his lack of faith in humanity’s ability to move forward. The “sepulchral city” of *Heart of Darkness* is perhaps the most striking example of Conrad’s tendency to portray cities as representative of the corruption he sees in mankind. Marlow’s first impression of the place is that of “a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre” (9). He attributes his opinion to “prejudice” (9), but it seems likely that this is *Conrad’s* prejudice against humanity, channeled through the protagonist of his story. His choice of images is extremely symbolic in light of the author’s own misanthropy; the

implication is that the inhabitants of the city are as bodies within a tomb, which is to say stagnant and dead. Marlow's further description of his surroundings extends this pattern. He mentions a "narrow and deserted street in deep shadow...a dead silence...as arid as a desert," all of which indicate that progress, for whatever reason, has failed to bring the city to life (9). When Marlow returns to the city at the end of the novel after having completed his voyage, he describes at least a little activity in its streets, but his representation of the people he encounters there is far from complimentary. He points out figures who engage in mundane, even pointless acts, resenting "the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams" (70). The presence of at least a few people would seem a welcome addition to the previously empty city, as they do seem to be part of the cityscape in Marlow's illustration. However, they do not offer any sort of contribution to it, and even detract from its appeal. Their lives are equally as unattractive as the city in which they live; in spite of the opportunities that progress seems to offer, they engage in petty activities and fail to live up to the ideals of the time. They do not meaningfully contribute to society, but rather make their surroundings even less attractive through their mundane routines. In other words, the sepulchral city and its inhabitants seem to have gained little from progress. The stagnation Marlow finds in this particular location appears to reflect Conrad's dim view of modern society and is likely characteristic of his opinion of Western culture at large. In a word, the European cityscape in *Heart of Darkness* is, in the author's mind, a testament to the vanity of civilization's efforts to better itself.

"The Fire Sermon," the third section of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, stands out in that it depicts the consequences of attempts at progress: an existence which, for all the bold theories of social improvement popular at the time, fails to satisfy even the most prosperous in society. Like Conrad, the poet uses the modern cityscape as a symbol for the moral decline of Western culture. The speaker is probably of either the upper or middle class, as he cites several places noted for luxury and leisure (e.g. the Cannon Street Hotel, the Metropole, Margate Sands). Given his standing in society and the corresponding lack of

lofty language in the poem, “The Fire Sermon” seems to be a direct criticism of the excessive and empty lives of the rich. Here, there is practically no mention of anything that transcends the mundane or carries any significance. Indeed, the speaker sets this section “under the brown fog of a winter moon” (208), which indicates that there is no warmth either in the time of year or in the hearts of the people he describes. Moreover, he claims that ““On Margate Sands / I can connect / Nothing with nothing” (300-2), revealing that in even the most comfortable and aesthetically appealing of locations (or perhaps *because* of them), people have no sense of meaning in their lives so long as they believe only in outward appearances.

“Prufrock” takes a fairly neutral stance with respect to conditions in modern society and presents somewhat more optimistic perspective of 20<sup>th</sup> century middle-class life. In the first part of the poem, as in “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot’s descriptions of the city are sincere and rather unappetizing. He speaks bluntly of middle-class establishments such as “one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants” (6-7), giving a sense of society’s hollow belief in materialism. In the next stanza, the “pools that stand in drains” and “soot that falls from chimneys” also contribute to an unromantic scene by associating aspects of the industrial cityscape with failed progress (18-19). The imagery here is that of the pollution and manmade filth that are byproducts of industry and mass production—something that is directly attributable to the middle and upper classes’ desire for material goods and representative of society’s moral degeneration. Moreover, the water and soot “stand” and “fall,” respectively (18-19), which indicates that industrial waste, like the “progress” it symbolizes, either goes nowhere or is inclined to fall. Later, though, the speaker shifts away from this accusatory tone and seems almost wistful in his consideration of “the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets” (101), suggesting that perhaps commonplace beauty helps to redeem urban culture despite the cityscape’s numerous flaws. The speaker in this poem finds fault with the filth (both physical and metaphorical) in his surroundings, but he takes time to present details about the charm of city life that somewhat compensate for it. He seems unsure, however, whether or not beauty can truly overcome progressive filth.

Just as “The Fire Sermon” examines the surprising lack of

fulfillment in a supposedly ideal way of life, so “Preludes” illustrates the tragic conditions to which the lower classes are relegated. This poem portrays the decaying cityscape of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century while simultaneously drawing attention to reality through a depiction of the commonplace routines of the lower class. Eliot makes much of the weariness and squalor inherent in the lives of modern workers, but also treats them sympathetically as the “victims” of progress. He demonstrates the connection between the slums and the people who live there by pointing out the “burnt-out ends of smoky days” and “sawdust-trampled street[s]” that coincide with the laborers’ weariness and resignation (4, 16). The speaker experiences the “notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing” while considering the lifestyle of the poor, which, by extension, could mean that he views the upper class as the opposite—something that is neither gentle nor suffers, and therefore oppresses the lower classes (50-51). By sympathizing with the often-disregarded working class, Eliot indicates that in spite of the monotony of a lower-class setting, a certain “humanness” (for lack of a better term), though conspicuously absent in his other poems, exists there. These people, while not materially wealthy, at least demonstrate that they are human and not the machines or beasts that their superiors make them out to be.

### **Agency and Self-Esteem**

In addition to the symbolic urban decay they describe in the modern cityscape, another symptom of “progress” gone awry in the two authors’ works is characters’ lack of agency, or ability to take charge of their own affairs. For Eliot and Conrad, this issue is impossible to resolve regardless of the circumstances in which characters may find themselves. Works such as Smiles’ *Self Help* define social mobility as an integral part of 20<sup>th</sup> century progressive culture, yet the ease with which one can fall from grace and lose standing in society due to a poor choice either renders one unable to choose or creates impossible choices that offer no desirable consequence. Speakers in Eliot’s poems address their inability to improve or even control their own lives, afraid that they will be treated with disdain by their family and peers. Their lack of agency is caused by the debilitating fear that they will lose their influence due to poor judgment: they fail to make decisions because they cannot determine the “proper” course of action that would allow

them to maintain their social standing. Conrad's protagonists, on the other hand, care less about rank than they do about ideology. Marlow is presented with numerous moral decisions as he attempts to reach Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, but the usual freedom that comes with the ability to make choices for oneself is outweighed in his case by the possible moral repercussions he could suffer as a consequence of faulty judgment. He is not concerned with how society views him—on the contrary, he is oblivious to public opinion—and only cares about the moral impact his decisions will have on his own life. Despite the somewhat different situations in which Eliot's and Conrad's respective speakers find themselves, both sides suffer equally because of the overwhelming pressure to make wise decisions, whether to gratify others or maintain peace of mind.

Eliot's character sketches in *Prufrock and Other Observations* help to explain how certain forces in "progressive" society can lead to an utter lack of agency. The speaker of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is perhaps the best example of an individual who finds himself powerless. Throughout the poem, he asks (rhetorical) questions of an unknown audience, indicating that he cannot make decisions on his own. The fact that his questions often concern everyday matters—"Do I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" (122)—implies that he does not have the power to control his own petty affairs, let alone make more important decisions (122). Moreover, the speaker dwells on possibilities, asking whether "[it would] have been worth it after all" if he *had* taken action in the past, but this only further contributes to his sense of helplessness (87, 99). Even so, the hesitation he experiences is not necessarily an inherent flaw in his character; rather, societal pressures seem to have led to his indecisiveness. He worries that he may fall short of the ideal, fearing, for example, that the public will hold his aging appearance against him. Obsessed with social position and etiquette, he apparently thinks that even a single *faux pas* might ruin his standing. He is, according to Robert McNamara, "afraid of both himself and others" because he is "anxious about the prospect of inadvertently revealing himself" to the public as well as "being misread or being fully read" when he deliberately expresses his beliefs (374). In other words, fear of failure, possibly due to his regret about decisions he had failed to make or in which he had chosen poorly, renders him

unable to choose the proper course of action in the present. The speaker, paralyzed by anxiety, has no agency, but he is not to blame for his situation.

Another powerless character in Eliot's poetry is the upper-class female speaker in "A Game of Chess," the second section of *The Waste Land*. In spite of the incredible wealth surrounding her (which identifies her as privileged), she is unable to decide how to live her life. Numerous words and phrases from the first part of this section suggest that as an affluent woman, she should have authority over others. For instance, the speaker emphasizes that her chair is "like a burnished throne," which suggests that she holds some power to influence others (77). The "glitter of her jewels" she wears and "coffered ceiling" of the room itself also attest to her financial well-being (84, 93). According to contemporary notions of social progress, an upper-class woman such as she, situated in the highest echelons of society, should enjoy a great deal of power. Eliot, on the other hand, describes her as powerless in that her prosperity grants her neither purpose nor happiness. She lacks confidence, asking the other speaker (presumably her husband), "What shall we do to-morrow [sic]? / What shall we ever do?" (133-34). A Prufrock-like character in her own right, this speaker receives no support from her silent husband. Complaining that her "nerves are bad to-night" (111), she asks him trivial questions: "What is that noise? [...] What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?" (117-19). Shortly after, showing the same sort of anxiety she displays in her earlier inquiries, she asks a much more significant question: "What shall I do now? What shall I do?" (131). Although her husband seems to have a reasonable, if seemingly routine plan for this particular evening, he refuses to respond to any of her questions regardless of their substance, and without his encouragement and answers, she remains incapable of deciding what to do on her own. Eliot scholar Philip Sicker calls the woman's predicament "ironic" in that the opulence surrounding her "evokes the image of Shakespeare's Cleopatra" (423), when in fact she is neither a politically powerful queen nor a seductress. She cannot persuade her husband to listen to her, much less command people of lower social rank. Once again, this lack of agency is an ironic consequence of her dedication to progressive ideals. She occupies a position near the top of the social ladder, yet



this is more a curse than a blessing. The woman seems not to know how to act according to her station, and therefore cannot act for fear that she will demean herself. If Prufrock was paralyzed by his anxiety, then the female speaker is in an even worse predicament; she has more to lose, and accordingly has more to worry about.

As previously mentioned, the desire for social mobility is one of the most significant factors in the modern mindset. The pursuit of this goal at the expense of moral virtue and genuine compassion leads to a certain hollowness and superficiality which Eliot diagnoses in the title character of "Aunt Helen." In this poem, the speaker notes that his aunt was affluent in life and appears to have been comfortable with her rank, but that after her death she is quickly forgotten and proves to have no real substance. The undertaker who claims her body, for example, is "aware that this sort of thing had occurred before" but finds no reason to attach special importance to the deceased woman (7). Even though she has lived near "a fashionable square" and has had enough money to hire servants, he treats her as he would any other corpse, showing that her success in life is ultimately inconsequential (2). Likewise, her maid, who "had always been so careful while her mistress lived," abandons her previous meticulousness and cavorts with Helen's former footman (13). From this description, one can infer that money and social status were the only features of the bond between her and her servants; she did not care for them on a personal level, nor they for her. All that mattered to Helen in life was maintaining the appearance of a "proper" woman according to the values of her time, but Eliot takes care to show that such an image is only superficial and has no lasting significance. Helen, for all her affluence, dies alone. While she appears to enjoy more agency than the speakers of "Prufrock" and "A Game of Chess," the poet reveals that while she lives, she does not even question whether she possesses the authority that she believes to own, and that after she dies, both he and the reader discover that her social standing means nothing.

In contrast to the fearful and utterly helpless speakers of "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, Marlow, the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, is fully capable of confronting the difficulties associated with his responsibility for both himself and his crew. The most significant issue he confronts is one that has no definite answer and that, regardless of

what he decides, will leave him less than satisfied. This is the “choice of nightmares” Marlow proposes to himself after meeting Kurtz, one which requires him to either abandon society (as Kurtz did once he came to power in the jungle) or to exist as a hypocrite in a society he now recognizes as two-faced and uncaring (62). Obviously, neither path is desirable, as he has already seen the former manifest itself in Kurtz and the natives and the latter in the many company employees he has met during his journey. It is a no-win situation. Nevertheless, Marlow is forced into this decision because savagery and civilization cannot coexist. He makes his final choice in the final pages of the book when he decides to lie to the Intended about her fiancé’s last words and tells her what she hopes he would say instead of revealing to her the ugly truths he has learned about the condition of humanity. This demonstrates his resolution, however reluctant, to remain a part of society and to reject the brutality he saw embodied in Kurtz—another character given the capacity to choose. Given the latter’s high status in the Company, Marlow expects that he is able to exert authority over others as he pleases. On the contrary, Kurtz is unable to manage what happens around him after falling ill, showing that the ability to choose is not necessarily the same as control over one’s circumstances. Like the speakers of Eliot’s poems, Marlow suffers from a dilemma resulting from societal pressures. If the culture in which he lives were less distant from earlier ways of life and less inclined to engage in deceit, there would likely be no reason to make a decision, but due to the dichotomy that the modern world perceives between primitiveness and progress, the irony is that his choice offers practically no autonomy. Marlow has “at least a choice” of evils (62), but, in truth, it is a false choice in that neither option will lead him safely out of his predicament. Ultimately, the agency Marlow appears to enjoy in actually *having* the capacity to choose is a burden rather than a benefit.

“Progress” was not always a clearly defined concept in the culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even at a time “when...society [was] generally confident about the resilience of its institutions” (Shpayer-Makov 491), some dissenters believed that the government ought to be overthrown in order to achieve what they considered to be real progress. Specifically, they wanted to take matters into their own hands by “rejecting state control, capitalist economy, social hierarchy,

and conformity, [and] demanding the total re-construction of the human condition” (Shpayer-Makov 488). While it was not a legitimate threat in Victorian Britain, “anarchism was associated with violence, rebellion, atheism, aliens, internationalism, and threats to private property and the bourgeois lifestyle” and thus struck fear into the hearts of the public (Shpayer-Makov 513). Despite anarchism’s lack of actual power to influence Britain, the very notion that the efforts of society to better itself could be at risk caused a great deal of concern. However, it is unfair to assume that anarchists, the enemies of mainstream development, wanted to destroy progress; on the contrary, they wished to enforce a progress-driven agenda of their own. In this way, “progress” is a matter of perspective, and even the anarchists’ subversive behavior can rightly be labeled progressive.

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad demonstrates that a person’s inability to make decisions can be exploited by others in the name of this anarchistic form of progress. Verloc, the titular agent (literally, one who acts), uses his mentally impaired brother-in-law Stevie as an unwilling accomplice in his mission to bomb Greenwich. While he himself is a fairly incompetent saboteur, he has enough agency to recognize that he can take advantage of his relationship with Stevie in order to accomplish his own goals. His abusive treatment of Stevie leads to his brother-in-law’s death in the explosion and ultimately his own demise at the hands of his outraged wife. Therefore, Verloc is directly responsible for sacrificing Stevie in the name of revolution and “progressive” politics. Critic John Lutz confirms that Stevie “has no value to [Verloc] until he realizes that he can use him...Driven by egoism and pitiless self-interest, [Verloc] is incapable of recognizing any standard of value other than exchange value or any relevant criterion besides how a person can be exploited” (8-9). Lutz adds that early 20<sup>th</sup> century society is “characterized by social and economical domination” to the extent that when other characters (Winnie, in this instance) liberate themselves from the exploitation that the likes of Verloc impose upon them (in Winnie’s case, through murder), they cannot truly be free. He believes that “the notion of free agency can only be an illusion that possesses no real material foundation,” meaning that no character in the novel truly enjoys the ability to act for himself (9). Although Verloc and his compatriots appear to have the capacity

for self-determination due to their power to influence others, they, like the rest of society, are powerless to shape their own lives.

In spite of the differences between Eliot's and Conrad's characters with regard to their ability to take action, none of them can live as they truly wish and are bound to the rigid codes of society. They are ironically powerless even when given the opportunity to choose, let alone without it, and those who *are* able to make decisions take advantage of those who are unable to act for themselves. This fact directly contradicts Smiles' optimism that anyone can succeed through diligence and hard work, and actually shows the opposite to be true. Progress has apparently left no place for personal freedom and leaves most, if not all individuals at the mercy of fate.

### **Redemption**

Conrad's and Eliot's visions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are, at first glance, hopeless. Between the incurable self-interest that plagues mankind and the machine-like efficiency that makes "progress" possible, the future seems bleak. Despite their pessimism, however, the two authors offer a few suggestions that society can recover from its present state of decay. By pursuing interpersonal relationships and taking the time to recognize the inherent value of human life, both literary characters and their real-world counterparts can counter the damaging effects of progress, at least to a degree.

### **Conrad: Embracing the Bonds of Humanity**

In interactions between social equals or between superiors and subordinates in Conrad's works, the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships is generally absent. Many of the ideals of the period (namely those which Santayana criticized in his *Life of Reason*) minimized the significance of the individual and measured progress only by the extent to which society as a whole can advance. For instance, industrialism and mass consumption effectively relegated human laborers to the rank of machines or beasts. Nevertheless, Conrad argues that it is critically important for the individual to realize his place in society and to be capable of understanding the needs of others. Acts motivated by compassion in "The Secret Sharer" and "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'" reveal that, for all his cynicism, the author acknowledges that mercy can overcome restrictive social norms

and that a noble side of human nature therefore exists.

“The Secret Sharer” is a clear example of the dichotomy between empathy and the social norms (such as efficiency and inflexible adherence to an artificial framework of laws and regulations) that facilitate progress. The protagonist, an unnamed captain, appears to be the only character in the story who overlooks the demands of the law and allows Leggatt, an escaped criminal, a chance to escape in spite of having killed a man to save his ship. The crew of the *Sephora* is not unjustified in holding the man responsible for what he has done. Murder is murder, regardless of the motive. In fact, much of what Leggatt recounts to the protagonist makes him an *unsympathetic* character—for instance, his description of the man he strangled as a “miserable [devil] that [has] no business to live at all” demonstrates little remorse, although he also claims that his actions were necessary in order to save the ship. Critic J. D. O’Hara notes that such statements “reveal his arrogant feeling of moral superiority to other men” (445) and make him even more deserving of the confinement imposed on him by the crew, a punishment that he does not seem to understand because he feels no guilt for killing a man to prevent a disaster. In short, the captain has little reason to assist Leggatt, who is anything but a victim of unjust laws, yet he helps him despite numerous incentives to return the fugitive to his former captors.

By making the protagonist of “The Secret Sharer” one who performs an act of compassion in defiance of the seemingly unshakable tenets of 20<sup>th</sup> century British society, Conrad indicates that blind obedience to social codes is not always the best course of action. Instead, the author promotes mercy and forgiveness, not progress, as the hallmarks of an ideal culture and as a means of recapturing an understanding of the ineffable connection between all men. The protagonist’s actions are motivated not by a desire for justice, as is the case with the crew of the *Sephora*, but by a sense of the humanity he shares with his new acquaintance. To him, Leggatt is his “double,” both physically and, by the end of the story, emotionally; this leads the him to sympathize with a man with whom he might, if it had been anyone else, have turned in to the *Sephora* and thus fulfilled his civic duty. According to Charles G. Hoffmann, it is because of “this psychological state of identification [that] Leggatt’s moral crisis becomes metaphorically the captain’s

moral crisis” and by extension his cause for assisting him (653). As a consequence of this self-identification, he is able to understand the humanity they have in common. He can ascribe to his own sense of being to his double because he sees that, regardless of their respective moral views and personalities, they possess the same human spirit. Leggatt, then, is not only a literal “second self” but a representation of the human race at large. For instance, upon receiving a visit from the captain of the *Sephora*, the protagonist states, “I looked politely at Captain Archbold...but it was the other [that is, Leggatt] I saw.” In light of the captain’s fear of Archbold uncovering his secret, this vision could be nothing more than a manifestation of his nervousness—he may see manifestations of Leggatt everywhere due to psychological stress. On the other hand, however, it may be due to his realization of the bond he shares with not only his double but also the rest of mankind that he sees “the other”—his own humanity projected first onto Leggatt, and later onto those around him. Thus, despite the close similarity between the two men, the captain’s actions are ultimately motivated by a human compassion that causes him to ignore the law not because the person he assists is his double, but because he is his fellow man. While the prideful and unrepentant Leggatt is certainly of a different temperament than his counterpart, the humble and sympathetic captain, both belong to the human community—as do all the characters in the short story, whether they realize it or not.

“The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’” plays out differently than “The Secret Sharer,” but conveys a similar message about the conflicting roles of duty and empathy in society. In this case, the majority of the characters in the story, not the minority, are sympathetic to the dying James Wait, although he, like Leggatt, does not necessarily deserve their help. In fact, the crew finds him alternately insufferable and irreplaceable, and sometimes both at once. Despite his constant complaints about his illness (which lead them to believe that he is a malingerer), the other crew members nevertheless risk their lives and endanger their ship when rescuing him from his cabin during a storm; the narrator remarks that they “hated him...more than anything under heaven,” yet they “did not want to lose him” (19). The rationale the narrator provides for this inconsistency is that “it had become a personal matter between us and the sea...Had we (by an incredible

hypothesis) undergone similar toil and trouble for an empty cask, that cask would have become as precious to us as Jimmy was...we hated James Wait” (19). However, he readily admits that it would be “incredible” for such effort to be undertaken merely for the sake of recovering a meaningless object; as with the protagonist of “The Secret Sharer,” the real motivation for their efforts seems to be the common bond of humanity, regardless of their assertions that Wait should mean nothing to them. He explains that through their experiences with him, they had become “highly humanised, tender, complex...as though we had been over-civilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life” (35). Although most of the crew is united by their alleged hatred of Wait, they also make a unified effort to keep him alive as long as possible due to an unspoken, deep-rooted sympathy, whether they realize (or are willing to admit) it or not.

### **Eliot: Stability Through Catharsis and Conversation**

Conrad’s descriptions of empathy highlight the possibility that society can redeem itself through the spontaneous recognition of the innate humanity common to us all, as in “The Secret Sharer” and “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus.’” Eliot holds a different opinion; he believes that the sense of shared humanity Conrad depicts is not something that can occur of its own accord. Rather, he finds that members of progressive society, when left to their own devices, naturally drift apart from one another. The solution to this problem is, in theory, simple—to undo this isolation, people must be willing to relate to one another without affectation or fear of rejection. Yet to do so proves difficult in practice because of the assumptions made by those who subscribe to notions of progress. Should the individual attempt to break out of isolation, if his audience is not sympathetic or even willing to listen, then his efforts are in vain. Thus, in order to facilitate the sort of personal connection he considers necessary to counter the trend of isolation he identifies in his works, Eliot advocates art, beauty, and meaningful conversation as a means of discovering what truly matters in life and finding subjects to discuss with like-minded nonconformists.

Eliot submits that if the public were to embrace art and become less emotionally distant, the sort of people whom he describes in his poetry as lacking meaning in their lives would be able to comprehend what makes their existence worthwhile. In the oft-quoted second

stanza of “The Burial of the Dead,” the first book of *The Waste Land*, the speaker calls modern society “stony rubbish” (20) and a “heap of broken images” (22), his metaphor for the superficiality and purposelessness brought about by progressive culture. In other words, he believes that the rapid pace of progress has reduced old ideals to mere fragments of what they previously were. Once intact, they are now unintelligible remnants of a greater whole. Yet even these remnants provide a device for restoring meaning to a meaningless world. In the final lines of the conclusion of *The Waste Land*, the narrator claims that he has “shored [these fragments] against [his] ruins” (430), meaning that even in its present state, society has some aesthetic worth that can be salvaged. Even though the last stanza of “What the Thunder Said” contains a number of apparently unrelated quotes and excerpts, the speaker seems to argue that the “fragments” he lists retain their value—regardless of the context in which they appear—simply because they are art.

Despite the unpleasant aspects of modern cities detailed in Eliot’s poetry, there are positive qualities that can counteract the negative influences of squalor, industrial waste, and decadence. The art Eliot mentions is by no means limited to that produced by artists; it also applies to incidental beauty in cityscapes, such as in “Prufrock” and “Preludes.” As aforementioned, the speakers of both poems describe their surroundings in a positive light despite the squalor around them. The narrator of “Preludes” provides an illustration of city life that raises the mundane to the sublime:

And when all the world came back  
 And the light crept up between the shutters  
 And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,  
 You had such a vision of the street  
 As the street hardly understands (30-34)

While the person of whom he speaks cannot relate all of the details of his ineffable vision to others, the fact that he is capable of experiencing such beauty at all hints that humanity is not beyond deliverance. The city, the physical manifestation of 20<sup>th</sup> century ideals, may at first glance seem to be inextricably linked with the flawed notion of progress, but the speaker’s observation that cityscapes can possess



the same transcendental beauty as natural landscapes shows that this does not have to be the case. Likewise, the narrator of “Prufrock” observes “the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows during his nightly walks through the city (71-72). Here, he is able to witness Conrad’s notion of innate human bonds firsthand. The lonely men are themselves part of the cityscape, and the smoke from their pipes, while not as “natural” as the sunlight and sparrows of “Preludes,” takes on a deep significance that speaks to him in an indescribable way just as much as the “sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets” do (101). In both poems, “unintentional art,” whether of natural or human design, is a medium through which the individual can come to understand the sublime and gain a sense of the role that beauty plays in creating meaning in life.

For Eliot, the inability to relate to others isolates the individual and makes self-discovery all the more difficult; if the speakers of “Prufrock” and “A Game of Chess” *were* able to connect with others, however, they could conceivably give vent to their frustration with modern society and conquer their own flaws. This prospect is not impossible, as these characters try (albeit unsuccessfully) to relate to those around them. In “Prufrock,” the speaker, discouraged by his previous failures, confesses that “it is impossible to say just what I mean” (104). When he has attempted to speak his mind in the past, he has found himself in an uncomfortable position, “pinned and wriggling on the wall” by a “formulated phrase” from those with whom he endeavors to associate (56-58). He can only counter their “formulated phrases” by “[spitting] out all the butt-ends of [his] days and ways”—an equally trivial response (60). However, if both he and his audience were to talk about matters of substance and eschew the trite back-and-forth he describes in “Prufrock,” they might be able to develop a genuine bond. Although this would expose them to ridicule and rejection, it would also create an opportunity for them to connect at a deeper level than is afforded by small talk.

Likewise, the man and woman from “A Game of Chess,” members of the upper-class who apparently subscribe to notions of progress, fail to understand one another and suffer as a result. She, complaining of “bad nerves,” pesters her husband with questions and insinuates that he refuses to reply to her: “Why do you never speak? Speak. / What

are you thinking of? What thinking? What?" (111-13). She clearly wants reassurance from him and certainly makes an effort to reach out to him, which hints that the two of them are capable of forming the type of bond that Eliot claims can repair society. Unfortunately, due to her lack of social graces, she attempts to do so in a manner that serves only to further isolate her from her husband. For his part, he makes no attempt to encourage his wife, so he is as guilty as she in perpetuating the lack of communication between them. While she asks him to respond to her questions, he recites doggerel verse and fragments of Shakespeare to himself, revealing that he scarcely pays her any attention. Each of them, then, is equally to blame for their dysfunctional relationship. Should they engage in actual conversation, though, they might be able to come to terms with their ostensibly disparate personalities and reach an amiable resolution or some sort of compromise.

Admittedly, there is no direct evidence in Eliot's works that healthy, sustainable relationships can really exist. The author's only clear conclusion is that the absence of this sort of bond is one of the most pressing matters that society must confront, as evidenced by the plethora of dysfunctional relationships he sets down in his poems. Yet the desire that the speakers of "Prufrock" and other poems express for a meaningful connection with others demonstrates that despite their failure to form interpersonal relationships, they have the motivation to keep trying. The frustration they convey indicates that they have not yet achieved their goal, but Eliot's aim seems to be to offer hope that with time and effort, they, like their real-life counterparts, can succeed in finding meaning in life.

## **Conclusion**

Conrad and Eliot present several possible approaches that could lead to a reversal of the decay they observe in society, yet their criticism of modern culture still remains valid. The replacement of traditional values with progressive ones—material production, efficiency, and society-wide development—have, in their opinion, changed Western civilization for the worse at a fundamental level. Unless the public addresses this paradigm shift and confronts the problems that arise from the implementation of progressive ideals, the authors affirm that life will continue to lack meaning and purpose. The characters in

their respective works, while not necessarily realistic or well-rounded, demonstrate through their actions and introspection that progress not only causes problems for the individual, but also for society at large.

Nor are the issues associated with progress strictly a dilemma of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the past hundred years, society has made extraordinary developments with regard to scientific knowledge, transportation, communication, and international relations that easily surpass the innovations of previous generations. Yet this unrelenting emphasis on scientific and socio-economic progress is ideologically no different from the Western mindset during the turn of the previous century. Conrad and Eliot may very well have been right in their assertions that society cannot hope to evolve, as it seems we not have improved with respect to forming meaningful relationships and acknowledging the value of human life since the period in which they wrote.

Therefore, society today is faced with the same choice as the society of a hundred years ago: to continue to subscribe to superficial notions of progress, or to turn to a less materialistic and more compassionate way of life. Conrad and Eliot's argument that civilization can restore itself by embracing art, conversation, and the human spirit may be reasonable, but unless a significant portion of society were to follow their proposed system, no significant cultural shift will ever occur. The two men, as social critics, have "diagnosed" the symptoms of decay within progress; it remains for society, their patient, to follow through and take their advice in order to recover. The choice that they proposed nearly a century ago still stands, and it is the task of modern society to decide, once and for all, the path for Western civilization, and by extension humanity as a whole, to follow.

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