

## Germany's Cultural Legacy

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It is difficult to exaggerate the effects that the Great War had on the collective consciousness of Western society. An analysis of its effects reveals the war to have been a cataclysm which served to alter drastically the accepted social mores of the pre-war age. In a sense, therefore, the Great War can be personified as an iconoclast, an instigator of social change and novelty by virtue of sanctioned, unprecedented destruction. The ill-fated generation who participated in the war felt and nurtured this radical change in the socio-cultural status quo. Emerging from the detritus of the war, they returned home to find themselves alienated from the world which they had known prior to 1914. What they knew before the War could not possibly be applied to the post-war years.

Upon entering the Great War, the people of Great Britain and the United States subscribed to Victorian ideals that were, as Modris Eksteins explains, concerned with the objectification of pleasure (virtuous pleasure, not sensory pleasure) and duty.<sup>1</sup> Pleasure and duty were inextricably linked, they were both rooted in religious and moral virtuosity; one's duty existed to serve society. Victorians were concerned with "rationalism, empiricism, and utility." Theirs was a world "devoid of spiritual values" which sanctified traditional morality and disdained the evils of impromptu or spontaneous passion.<sup>2</sup> The Victorian principles of empirical, historical value, and collective, not individual, service were shattered by the War. Soldiers returning from the front could not bring themselves to accept this dogma, for they had just witnessed the slaughter of much of their generation by the technological efficiency and supposed moral rationalism of their respective societies. How, questioned the survivors, could a society proclaiming rational, unmitigated progress destroy the very generation

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<sup>1</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Books, 1989), 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

responsible for maintaining this progress? Returning from the war, soldiers found themselves having to define and establish their own ideals, which were radically different from those maintained prior to the war.

Whereas Victorians scorned those who were slaves to passion and pleasure, the Germans extolled such virtues. Eksteins explains in his great oeuvre, *The Rites of Spring*, that the conceived notion of *Kultur* – or culture – was, in pre-war Germany, essentially the antithesis of Victorian ideals. *Kultur* was primarily concerned with a retreat within the self. *Kultur* focused on the importance of an inner freedom, where the satisfaction of the soul and of the senses was deemed more important than the satisfaction of the collective. Above all, *Kultur* was a matter of spiritual cultivation.<sup>3</sup> Life was not to be concerned with morality nor with codes of behaviour, as was the case with the British. The notion of *Kultur* derided the quest for material gain and embraced, in Goethe’s Faustian spirit, the essence of life, or rather, the meaning of existence. “Life,” it was deemed by the German *avant-garde*, “ideally should follow art.”<sup>4</sup> German *Kultur* therefore was preoccupied with the aesthetic value of life; art, they argued, “would lead to freedom.”<sup>5</sup>

Eksteins explains that it was partially Great Britain’s disgust for these German ideals, and vice versa, which motivated the Great War.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it was the German notion of *Kultur* that survived the ravages of the war, despite the British and Americans being the bitter victors. As a result, people in Great Britain and the United States retreated within themselves in order to seek a new beginning. In order to find an identity and a purpose to life, they embraced the German notion of *Kultur*. This embrace manifested itself in the Lost Generation’s famous disillusionment, which concerned itself with the ambiguous and often unanswerable search for a purpose to life. Passion and decadence became *l’eau de vie* while Victorian behaviour, sexual morality, and hallowed tradition were shunned. Whereas Eksteins argues that – due to the Great War – art had come to define both life and history, the Lost

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 87.

Generation found a different ideal: that life had become art, or an art-form. The focus became living life to its fullest. The act of living in its purest, most carnal form was what truly mattered. To live and above all, *to experience*, became the obsession, if not the *raison d'être*, of the years following the war. The ethos of life as art and the adoption of pre-war German values was reflected in the elite literary circles of the Anglophone world in the inter war years. The lust for experience manifested itself in a focus on the immediate present, in the stated desire for a spiritual rebirth and for satisfaction of the senses, regardless of what moral or social boundaries might be crossed in the process.

The experience, be it moral or immoral, was of the essence; the senses were to be gratified in the present, the past relegated to horrific, structured, and mechanized irrelevance. This was a form of introspection, an attempt to answer the most ambiguous question of purpose: the meaning of life. As a result, the fundamental aspects of Victorian society – reason, morality, progress and worship of history – were erased and replaced.

### **To Life and Only to Live**

History, it was maintained following the Great War, was irrelevant. In a spirit echoing the sentiments of pre-war German society, the *zeitgeist*<sup>7</sup> professed an immediacyechoing the sentiments of pre-war German society, whereby Kultur (as understood by the German intelligentsia and the German cultural core) sought a rejection of the traditional understanding of time, in order to live in the present and fulfill one's immediate spiritual yearning.<sup>8</sup> To most at the end of the war, the ideals that they had defended from 1914 to 1918 were part of history, and history in itself had become irrelevant. The focus shifted instead to the present and the future, as Henry Miller, a writer who bridged the gaps of surrealism and modernism, proclaims, "...there is no such thing as time, only the present."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Zeitgeist*: the spirit of the times.

<sup>8</sup> Eksteins, 73 – 78.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Miller, *The Tropic of Capricorn* (New York, NY: The Grove Press Inc., 1961), 287.

Miller turned life into a decadent art-form. He dictated the swing of his pen, rather than letting the swing of the pen dictate him. His life, he believed, was an attempt to get nearer to himself, “for there is only one great adventure and that is inward toward the self, and for that, time nor space nor even deeds matter.”<sup>10</sup> In this simple statement, Miller essentially refuted the foundations upon which Victorian society was built and controlled. There existed in Victorian Britain a great belief that time was coherent and reliable, that decorum and courage were of sincere and objectified worth and importance.<sup>11</sup> With this statement, Miller tersely castigated this assumption, as he asserted that neither “time” nor “deeds” have any effect upon the introspective spirit of the individual. Deeds, be they virtuous or despicable, were irrelevant. Miller existed in a similar vein to Albert Camus’ Meursault in the novel *l’Etranger*<sup>12</sup>; totally indifferent to the emotions of others, he did as his senses wished, and if this meant transgressing moral or cultural boundaries, so be it.

Vulgarity and/or the exploration of previously taboo subjects became a means with which Miller and his colleagues crossed these boundaries, vented their emotions and brought sincerity to experience. “What was needed was exactly the clinical – or even obscene – language that [Victorian society] regarded as ‘weak.’”<sup>13</sup> Miller’s highly vulgar, intense prose served to define him as a sincere lover of life, he was by all means a *bon vivant*. His use of vulgarity was intended not so much to shock, as it was to place sincere emotion to his mania for life, his dreams, and his thoughts. In this sense, his philosophy resonated with that of pre-war Germany, which had at the heart of its cultural impetus, the rebellion against meaningless convention and insincerity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc., 1975), 21.

<sup>12</sup> Meursault shocks society with his indifference to their emotional and moral standards and they condemn him as a result.

<sup>13</sup> Fussell, 174.

<sup>14</sup> Eksteins, 86.

In fact, life was above all what Miller cherished the most: life in its most simple form, as dictated by desire.<sup>15</sup> Miller was often in rapture over the beauty of experience granted him by his very existence.

If I had the chance to be God I would reject it. If I had the chance to be a star I would reject it. The most wonderful opportunity which life offers is to be human. It embraces the whole universe. It includes the knowledge of death, which not even God enjoys.<sup>16</sup>

Miller's statement must be applied in the context of the Great War. The war, according to Paul Fussell, restructured the traditional "Christian experience," which was, in the course of an individual's lifetime, "Innocence, Fall, Redemption."<sup>17</sup> Following the war, the romantic tradition was distorted and the sequence was reversed. The "Christian experience" now existed as "...innocence, death, rebirth."<sup>18</sup> Miller's statement echoed this sentiment; death to him was a boon and an opportunity to experience or embrace "the whole universe." Rebirth, or death, therefore, was for Miller the final stage of his life's odyssey and represented his desire to retreat within himself and find, in death, the limitless possibility of experience.

Life was thus embraced in all its trappings: amoral, brutal, sexual, beautiful, kind. Literature in the post war years had broken entirely from that of the past. The most prized precepts of the Victorian age, religious (not individual) spirituality and a belief in the rational progress of time, were blatantly eviscerated. The Great War was a shocking reminder to the people of the time that the savage in them was very much alive and that the "prevailing Meliorist<sup>19</sup> myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century" was nothing

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Miller, *Sexus* (New York, NY: The Grove Press Inc., 1962), 192.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, *The Tropic of Capricorn*, 229.

<sup>17</sup> Fussell, 128.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>19</sup> The Meliorist myth was the idea that progress was a consequence of human effort, and that this process would eradicate the "evils" of man.

but a “hideous embarrassment.”<sup>20</sup> The inner core of man, viewed by Victorian society as immoral, decadent, and dangerous, had revealed itself during the four years of the war to be very much alive. As a result, the “Idea of Progress”<sup>21</sup> was rejected and the primal instinct, the beast instinct, within man was brought to light.

The idea of “beast instinct”<sup>22</sup> being central to the human endeavour had already found a place amongst German intellectuals before the war. *Bildung*, or self-cultivation, “which involved the nurturing of the spirit rather than the social being,”<sup>23</sup> as well as *Kultur*, saw to it that the concept of morality in its traditional form was rendered immaterial while the spirit became the *sine qua non* of existence.<sup>24</sup> The beast instinct was that which preoccupied itself with indulging the senses in order to reach spiritual fulfillment, a concept alien to the Anglophone world of 1913, but well known to the elite literary world following the war.

### **Awake! Senses!**

David H. Lawrence was one of the most preeminent writers of his time. He wrote extremely controversial prose that stimulated the hearts and minds of his contemporaries, yet he was also heavily criticized for his sexual and sensual anecdotes. The poem *Mystic* displays his embrace of the senses, albeit in quite an innocent tone. Regardless, the poem serves to indicate that, for Lawrence, senses were reality and truth, yet his society (or the traditionalists within his society) rejected his conclusions.

If I say I taste things in an apple, I am called mystic, which means a liar. The only way to eat an apple is to hog it down like a pig and taste nothing that is

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<sup>20</sup> Fussell, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Eksteins, 76.

<sup>24</sup> *Sine qua non*: without which it could not be.

real. But if I eat an apple, I like to eat it with all my senses awake. Hogging it down like a pig I call the feeding of corpses.<sup>25</sup>

Sensual experience was the key to fulfillment. If one denied these senses or if one “hog[ed] [the apple]...down like a pig,” one experienced nothing and therefore the act of eating the apple was worthy of corpses, of the dead. Sensory pleasure was the definition of life; the denial of it resulted in the stultification of the mind and, possibly, death itself.

If one denied oneself the senses and the spontaneity of passion, of lust and of life, then,...thou shalt begin to spin round on the hub of obscene ego a grey void thing that goes without wandering a machine that in itself is nothing a centre of the evil world.<sup>26</sup>

To Lawrence, then, turning one’s back on the carnal, primordial desires of man was actually *evil* and would eventually render one cold, grey, and without a soul or spirit. One would essentially cease to exist and acquire the amorphous shape of nothing. Again, we see the beast instinct within man resurfacing; the retreat within recurs and is found to be in want of experience, of joy and of satisfaction.

The longing for a spiritual, primal awakening snakes its way into Kate Leslie’s conscience in Lawrence’s novel *The Plumed Serpent*. The opening pages of the novel are dedicated to Kate’s disgust at witnessing a bullfight in Mexico City. She is introduced as the classic Victorian paragon, ill at ease when provoked by experiences that promote foreign sensations. She stares aghast at the bestial manoeuvres while her friends are mesmerized and enlivened by the spectacle. To her chagrin, her friends enjoy the bloodletting. For them, the experience is fantastic. “Life!” they call is jovially, while simultaneously Kate sneers cynically

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<sup>25</sup> David H. Lawrence, *Selected Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (London, UK: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1967), 78.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

at their search for experience.<sup>27</sup> Kate claims she has “lived her life”<sup>28</sup> and is therefore in no need of “sordid sensations.”<sup>29</sup> Despite her apparent apathy, Lawrence is quick to counter and infuse her with an ebullient spirit searching for a rebirth of the soul.<sup>30</sup> In a call to its own society, Lawrence screams in desperation, “Ye must be born again. Even the gods must be born again. We must be born again.”<sup>31</sup> Again, the inverted Christian paradigm emerges, as demonstrated by Fussell. Kate has experienced death and now seeks a rebirth, a rebirth of the spirit. She cries to her own soul, “give me the mystery and let the world live again for me!...And deliver me from man’s automatism!”<sup>32</sup> Kate craves life and beauty, but rejects “man’s automatism” or trite habit of following convention. She is seeking, in prime, pre-war German cultural ethos, *der innere Freiheit*, or inner freedom, as held by *Kultur*, separate from the machination of man and technology.<sup>33</sup>

Part of Lawrence’s fascination with Mexico and Kate’s experience there is his obsession with the primal instinct within man. In the Indians of Mexico Lawrence finds a people deemed uncivilized by his own society, but who reside in a spiritual realm towards which both he and Kate wish to gravitate. Kate is calling for a return to magic and wonder, and the means by which she is to achieve this is by gaining strength, knowledge and experience through joy.<sup>34</sup>

The Indians in this novel are subsumed as the embodiment of truth. For Lawrence, these primal “uncivilized” beings (anathema to the Victorian theme of progress) are images of what he is trying to convey: the translation of his soul and his desires from existential medium to script.<sup>35</sup> The Indians make Kate feel that “life [is] vast...and death...fathomless,”

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<sup>27</sup> David H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1926), 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Eksteins, 67.

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, xi.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

which essentially serves to explain her fascination with them. The Indians in Mexico are a far cry from the rigid and mechanized monotony of Kate/Lawrence's society. They are concerned with matters of the spirit; death appears not as an unsurpassable frontier, but rather as a portal through which to step, heralding the novelty of fathomless experience. Death appears not as an end, but as a new beginning. As mentioned above, it was experience and the vitality of the present that gave life force to those disillusioned with the state of their society. The past was irrelevant, history a sarcophagus of decaying Time and nothing more.

### **History as Irrelevance**

The survivors of the Great War rejected the Victorian ideals bestowed upon them by their parents and society. They looked instead to the German philosophy concerned with the present, with the future and with novelty. "If newness had been a strong German concern prior to 1914 and during the war, it became a universal preoccupation after the war."<sup>36</sup> Prior to the war, the Germans, to the consternation of the British, had "cared for the future, not for the past" and the *literati* and *avant-garde* of the 1920s and 30s followed suit.<sup>37</sup> Baron Felix Volkbein, a character in Djuna Barnes' novel *Nightwood*, highlights this fact. The Baron is a weak man, a nullity. His weakness is reflected in his obsession with history and time. As a non-entity, the Baron wishes to forge an identity from history. "His embarrassment" at not having an identity "took the form of an obsession for what he termed 'Old Europe.'"<sup>38</sup> He attempted, like the old order of Europe, to revere the past in order to give his life meaning and was, in the process, unsuccessful. Just as history had given the British both meaning and will before and during the war, "he felt that the great past might mend a little if he bowed low enough, if he succumbed and gave homage."<sup>39</sup> Barnes' revulsion of the past and determination to stamp her foot, and her generation's foot, on the past is evident. "In the acceptance of depravity the sense of the past is most fully captured...Corruption is the Age of

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<sup>36</sup> Eksteins, 257.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>38</sup> Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1936), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 12.

Time.”<sup>40</sup> She mirrors the German commitment to the present; she, like the Germans, looks upon the past with mockery, as an unimportant charade rife with death. Any form of devotion to the past, any definition of the individual using history as its crux, is nonsensical and moot, rather much “like a child’s drawing.”<sup>41</sup>

### *In vino veritas*<sup>42</sup>

Ernest Hemingway’s landmark novel *The Sun Also Rises* is a tersely poetic journey into the mind of a man who is often represented as the shining beacon of the Lost Generation. The novel follows the debauchery of a group of English and American expatriates through the streets of Paris and Pamplona. Brooding constantly beneath the surface is a deep sense of doom. The conversation is written in true Hemingway style, laden with understatement. The question that surfaces is, “what it is all about?” The “it” of course being life, which the protagonist of the novel Jake Barnes states with his proclivity for brevity: “I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about.”<sup>43</sup> This line, delivered by Jake in a flurry of drunken panache, is indicative of Hemingway’s desire to embrace life as it is. Finding out “how to live in it” was more important than any social or moral code. In his drunken, debilitated state Hemingway, indeed found truth, or rather, what he sought to gather from life. “Finding out how to live in it” entailed the search for and the knowledge gained from experience.

Hemingway drew an ambiguous line between the definitions of morality and immorality, suggesting that there was no line to be drawn. “That was morality; things that made you disgusted afterward. No, that must be immorality.”<sup>44</sup> The fact that the definition of morality was in flux suggests a significant rupture from the traditions of the past,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>42</sup> *In vino veritas*: in wine there is truth.

<sup>43</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (London, UK: Vintage, 1927), 129.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 129.

represented in the decadent lives that Jake and his friends lead. Gone were the days where sexual integrity was the keystone of an individual's moral fiber. The Victorian ethos of sexual prudery was replaced with the German emphasis on *Leibeskultur*, which promoted an appreciation of the human body as one devoid of social taboos and restrictions.<sup>45</sup> The German *avant-garde*, like Hemingway, "used sex to express their disillusionment with the contemporary values and priorities."<sup>46</sup> Lady Brett Ashley, one of the main characters in *The Sun Also Rises* certainly fits nicely into this paradigm as she moves from one sexual encounter to the next, irresponsible to the emotion offered to her by her numerous lovers.

There are many examples of her rejection of love. However, the ultimate rejection – not only of love, but also of the past – transpires in her rejection of Robert Cohn. Robert, who represents the chivalric traditions of a bygone age, "is the only character whom the author has rooted in the past."<sup>47</sup> He cannot understand why, when he shows such devoted love for the first time in his life, he is coldly rebuffed and forced to watch the object of his affections take off with another man. In witnessing this reversal of values (the traditional view being that a person should have sex out of love, not simply to satisfy sensuous cravings), Robert becomes "a creature of contempt" to the reader.<sup>48</sup> With Robert the object of hate, Hemingway indicates, like Jake, that the past is irrelevant, and that sexual morality as it was known to tradition, is a thing of yesterday. Jake remarks sarcastically, "He [Cohn] was so sure that Brett loved him. He was going to stay, and true love would conquer all."<sup>49</sup> Love in its pure, ideal form as imagined by the Victorians no longer exists.

Valour and sexual integrity, two benchmarks of Victorian society, were thus rescinded to the past. Sexual promiscuity, decadence and unchivalrous behaviour became the norm rather than the exception. Lieutenant Frederic Henry, another character, wallows in an alcoholic abyss, filled with frequent sexual encounters and disillusioned musings. He describes his time spent on leave,

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<sup>45</sup> Eksteins, 37, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>47</sup> Robert L. Scott, "In Defense of Robert Cohn," *College English* 18 (1957): 310.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>49</sup> Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, 173.

...nights in bed, drunk, when you knew that that was all there was, and the strange excitement of waking and not knowing who it was with you, and the world all unreal in the dark and so exciting that you must resume again the unknowing and not caring in the night, sure that this was all and all and all and not caring.<sup>50</sup>

This statement represents not only his disillusioned state but also his belief that there is nothing more to life than life itself. “Not caring” about “who it was with you” did not matter, because it was simply the vitality of experience that was all and nothing more. This feeling of hopelessness resurfaces towards the end of the novel, with Frederic concluding that, “that was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn.”<sup>51</sup> *A Farewell to Arms*, written three years after *The Sun Also Rises*, provided the answer to the question that the drunken Jake had proposed: there is no answer to the question of life. One can try to live in life, try to make living itself an art form, however, in the end death arrives and the riddle of life is as evasive as always. The lack of purpose exhibited by the characters in Hemingway’s novel is entirely the reverse of writers’ work prior to the war, where there were concrete answers to concrete questions and traditional virtue and morality existed throughout.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

The German idiom of *Kultur* thus prevailed, the Victorian ideals having been jettisoned to the newly irrelevant past. The spiritual retreat upon which Miller and Lawrence had embarked was marked by the desire to accept and indulge in all the experiences which life had to offer. The Victorian ethos of acting for the benefit of society rather than for that of the individual precluded, in the eyes of these writers, the spiritual and sensual realm,

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<sup>50</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1929), 19.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>52</sup> Fussell, 23.

amounting to a recipe for stagnation and an inhibitor of improvement of the human condition. What was to their contemporaries shocking decadence was for them an attempt to seek out answers to the questions that the casualties of the Great War would never be able to answer. To focus on the apparent doom elicited by Frederic in the closing segments of *A Farewell to Arms* is to forego the intention of the author, which was simply to learn how to live his life, to pursue it as a form of art, in order to then discern from experience what life was all about.

The revulsion of the past is perhaps not such a surprising result, considering that an entire generation bore witness to the slaughter of youth on an unprecedented scale. This revulsion is of significant importance, however, because it signified a break from the ideals of the Victorian age, which placed history and tradition in positions of adulation. The various authors described in this essay echoed the sentiments of their German *avant-garde* predecessors who, in what they saw as habitual denial of the spirit and soul, sought to acquaint themselves with the sensory and spiritual beauty that resided not in the past, but in the present. The aesthetic ideals to which they subscribed served as a segue way to happiness and freedom. For these writers, life was itself an art; the mere fact that one could feel, perceive and experience was artwork. They therefore sought to dictate what the artwork of life should and could be, by submitting to desire, by violating previously taboo subjects and socio-cultural standards and by embracing the present and rejecting the past, in order to arrive at an answer to the question on everyone's lips: "What is *it* all about?"

\***Kristian Jepsen** is a Political Science major and History minor. His primary focus has been on international relations and conflict studies, as well as the military history and literature of the twentieth century. The topic for his paper fused education and personal passion, as he realized, while reading *The Rites of Spring* (for a class), that many of his favourite authors' respective philosophies essentially echoed those of pre-WWI Germany. Kristian will be graduating in May 2008, after which he plans to work and travel in South America for an indefinite amount of time before eventually pursuing a Masters degree.