



L'Ennui Des Syrtes Or The Boredom Of Empires. On Collective Mood Of Existential Boredom In Julien Gracq's *The Opposing Shore*

By
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Abstract

The paper presents the phenomenon of boredom in Julien Gracq's novel *Le Rivage des Syrtes* (The opposing shore). The book describes Orsenna, oligarchic city-state loosely based on Venetian republic and empire, which is in a state of phoney war with Farghestan, a mysterious country across the closed sea of Syrtes. The story, narrated by Aldo, young aristocrat assigned for civic duty on the outskirts of empire, depicts the collective mood of anxious anticipation and boredom of the citizens of Orsenna "waiting for barbarians." The paper analyses Gracq's novel as a literary illustration of the theories of civilization demise, primarily that of Oswald Spengler, and of the decadence state of society led by bored and languorous elite. In the article, I hypothesize that the demise of empires can be partially attributed to them being boring for their civic agents and subjects alike. The sense of meaninglessness and the feeling of interminable ennui seem to contribute to the attitude of carelessness in both these groups resulting in lack of loyalty and low morale. I suggest that Orsenna's citizens suffer from societal existential boredom and that similar affliction might have been observed in late British Empire.

Keywords: boredom, Julien Gracq, The Opposing Shore, Spengler, collective mood, societal existential boredom

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Introduction. The Novel of “languorous suspense”

Given that little critical attention has been paid to Julien Gracq's (1986[1951]) *Le Rivage des Syrtes* (English translation: *The Opposing Shore*) outside France, one might assume that the novel is only of local significance or not particularly worthy of scrutiny. This assumption could not be more mistaken. The book won Goncourt's prize and captivated readers with its poetic language and imaginary. The author caused a literary scandal by refusing to accept the prize due to his opposition to the commercialization of literature. He believed that art should not be subjected to capitalistic speculation, as winning prizes boosts sales – yet scandals do as well. Gracq characterized a writer as “one who writes instead of talking, who reads rather than making public appearances, who meditates at home rather than droning away about himself on TV” (Kirkup 2007). He refused to make promotional tours and was opposed to all sorts of literary and academic honours. Julien Gracq is a pseudonym of Louis Poirier, a geography and history high school teacher at the lycée Claude Bernard in Paris. “Julien” is derived from Stendhal's character Julien Sorel, the main character in his novel *The Red and the Black* and can refer to “the romanesque adventure of Julien” or “Stendhalian scepticism” (Bowd 2004: 124). His adopted surname, Gracq, is a reference to the Gracchi brothers, the late Roman republic reformers, and may have symbolized the spirit of rebellion and belief in “the inevitability of defeat as illustrated by the doomed Roman brothers” (Bowd 2004: 124).

The book represents the genre of non-action novels and has been described as a “Wagnerian prelude for an unplayed opera” (Lagarde & Michard 1973: 647), as its focus is not on conveying a story but rather on creating a mysterious, out-of-time atmosphere. The poetic language, suggestive mood of demise, of “languorous suspense” (Anderson 2001) of anticipation, of expectation of an event describe and propel the whole novel. The narrator, Aldo, is a young man from one of the ruling families of Orsenna, an oligarchic city-state located in an imaginary geography of the Mediterranean. Orsenna is in a state of “phoney war” with Farghestan, a mysterious, culturally Islamic-like country across the closed sea of Syrtes. Although they are officially at war, neither side has made any move for decades if not centuries. Nevertheless, the collective mood of unspecified tension and anticipation seems widespread among the citizens of Orsenna. In this context, Aldo, driven by boredom, decides to abandon his aristocratic “party animal” lifestyle and requests an official civic duty assignment from the governing body of the state, the Signory, which consists of senior members of Orsenna's aristocratic families. As a result, he is sent as a so-called “secret observer” on a spy mission (although neither his role nor his mission were actually secret) to a run-down fortress on the shore of the Syrtes in the far southern region of the empire. The soldiers at the fortress have been hired as agricultural workers by

local farms because of the lack of meaningful duties. There, Aldo discovers maps of the region and becomes fascinated by Farghestan, where rumours suggest that political changes have occurred that could potentially end the prolonged stalemate between the two powers. The new regime was eagerly anticipated by some of Orsenna's citizens, especially in this distant province of the empire with its decaying centre, the city of Maremma. Aldo discovers a mysterious boat within the fortress's patrol limits and another boat moored off the ruins of a nearby town. He also reunites with his old friend, Vanessa Aldobrandi, who becomes his lover. Vanessa, who comes from a family of political traitors and conspirators involves Aldo in a plot aiming to reignite hostilities with Farghestan. Aldo assumes control of the fortress as a deputy to Captain Marino who was summoned to Orsenna for reporting duties. Due to curiosity, boredom, or the influence of Vanessa, Aldo sails off in a patrol boat beyond the forbidden boundary between the states and approaches Farghestan's capital, Rhages, whose guns fired in his direction. Soon after Aldo's return, he is visited by a representative of Farghestan demanding that he back down. However, Danielo, a powerful grey eminence of the Signory, who summons Aldo after the event, persuades him to do nothing and let the conflict continue to simmer, with the likely result being a war with Farghestan that Orsenna would lose. This would mean the end of Orsenna's old order, which Danielo saw as necessary, beneficial, and inevitable.

As previously mentioned, the entire political and geographical landscape of the novel is imaginary (probably not coincidentally, as Gracq's favourite author was Jules Verne, a "great fictional geographer," Kirkup 2007). Nonetheless, many critics and commenters have proposed probable sources of historical and non-fictional inspirations. First of all, Orsenna itself owes much to Italy. As Gracq acknowledged, the name comes from the Etruscan king Porsenna, and his Orsenna resembles Italian cities, both in architecture style and spatial arrangement, with its uptown separated by medieval walls from the rest of the city (Coignet 2018: 60). Orsenna's political constitution bears a striking resemblance to that of Venice, likewise an aristocratic republic where power belongs to patrician families who have intense rivalries. As a city-state, Orsenna is governed by a collegial, abstract, occult power, the Signory, a term used to designate medieval Venice before the word *Serenissima* was used. Supreme power in Orsenna belongs to the Senate, the Supervisory Council, which evokes the Council of Ten created in Venice in 1310 (Coignet 2018: 61). Additionally, as Arnaud Coignet (2018) observes, the name "Syrtes" resembles those of two gulfs: Syrta Major (along the Lybyan coasts of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica), and Syrta Minor (the gulf of Gabes in Tunisia), which are known for their warm and calm waters, where storms are rare and "oily sea stagnates like a swamp" (59). This symbolism represents the eventless, stale, and languish boredom characterizing the relationship between Orsenna and

Farghestan. Moreover, Gracq mentions in his description of the shores of Syrtes that before it became Orsenna's province, the region was invaded by Arabs, which could be a reference to the Arabian invasion of southern Italy or Sicily. The political stalemate between Orsenna and Farghestan is interpreted as echoing pre-1940 situation in France, known as the *drôle de guerre* (phony war), during which parts of society secretly conspired with the enemy (Bowd 2004: 128; Coignet 2018: 63–64).

The paper analyzes Gracq's novel as a literary illustration of the theories of civilization demise, primarily that of Oswald Spengler, and of the decadent state of society led by a bored and languorous elite. While I am not a literary specialist (but a sociologist), I do not provide a deep literary analysis of Gracq's novel. Instead, the book serves as a starting point, inspiration, and a source of examples for scrutinizing the boredom of empire as an instance of a collective mood of existential boredom, i.e., the profound boredom experienced by whole populations. The article hypothesizes that the demise of empires can be partially attributed to them being boring for their civic agents and subjects alike. The sense of meaninglessness and the feeling of interminable ennui seem to contribute to an attitude of carelessness in both these groups, resulting in a lack of loyalty and low morale. I suggest that Orsenna's citizens suffer from societal existential boredom and that a similar affliction might have been observed in the late British Empire.

The Demise of Civilization.

Gracq never made it a secret that one of the main sources of inspiration for writing *Le Rivage des Syrtes* was Oswald Spengler's (1945[1918]) opus magnum, *The Decline of the West*, published in 1918 and 1922 in Germany. The book presented an opposing view to that of scientific and democratic optimism, with its idea of constant progress and elevation, epitomized by the Enlightenment (see among others the Marquis de Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*), suggesting that each culture will inevitably fall and end. He viewed culture as a living organism susceptible to universal biological laws, going through the life stages of birth/childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age (Spengler 1945[1918]: 107; similar idea was presented by 4th-century Roman historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, by Hegel in his *Philosophy of History*, and by Nikolai Danilevsky; see Tainter 1988: 75–77). The historical development of every culture (Spengler enumerated eight of them: Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Arab, Indian, Mexican, Antic, and Western-European) follows a similar pattern: rise, zenith and decline (see Munkler 2007: 68). In the final stage, cultures reach their destiny and turn into civilizations, entering a decadent phase of development. According to Spengler,

Every Culture stands in a deeply symbolical, almost in a mystical, relation to the Extended, the space, in which and through which it strives to actualize itself. The aim once attained – the idea, the entire content of inner possibilities, fulfilled and made externally actual; the Culture suddenly hardens, it mortifies, its blood congeals, its force breaks down, and it becomes Civilisation, the thing which we feel and understand in the words Egyptianism, Byzantinism, Mandarinism. As such they may, like a worn out giant of the primeval forest, thrust their decaying branches towards the sky for hundreds or thousands of years, as we see in China, in India, in the Islamic world. It was thus that the Classical Civilization rose gigantic, in the Imperial age, with a false semblance of youth and strength and fullness, and robbed the young Arabian Culture of the East of light and air (Spengler 1945[1918]: 106).

One of Spengler's most provocative claims is that a culture's demise coincides with the full actualization of its soul, "the full sum of its possibilities in the shape of peoples, languages, dogmas, arts, states, sciences" (Spengler 1945[1918]: 106). Interestingly, cultures' demise often disguises itself as apparent revival.

At last, in the grey dawn of Civilization, the fire in the Soul dies down. The dwindling powers rise to one more, half-successful, effort of creation, and produce the Classicism that is common to all dying Cultures. The soul thinks once again, and in Romanticism looks back piteously to its childhood, then finally, weary, reluctant, cold, it loses its desire to be, and, as in Imperial Rome, wishes itself out of the overlong daylight and back in the darkness of protomysticism, in the womb of the mother, in the grave. The spell of a "second religiousness" comes upon it, and Late-Classical man turns to the practice of the cults of Mithras, of Isis, of the Sun – those very cults into which a soul just born in the East has been pouring a new wine of dreams and fears and loneliness (Spengler 1945[1918]: 108).

The senile decline of a culture is characterized by the atrophy of internal dynamics and the dominance of artificial products of history, as exemplified by all the (neo-) classical movements. A culture becomes incapable of producing anything novel, and draws its power from the motives, forms and concepts of previous, allegedly golden or classical, eras.

Spengler was a prime representative of early-twentieth-century historical catastrophism and his book, non-coincidentally published just after the end of the first World War, summarizes a pessimist strand in German thought (Szumera

1993: 89). This strand seems to be represented in France by Julien Gracq who saw Spengler's book as prophetic, accurately describing our own epoch when the soul of Western (referred to as Faustian by Spengler) civilization is already defunct, as manifested by soulless global capitalism.

Depictions of demise and decadence are frequent in *Le Rivage des Syrtes*. On the very first page, Gracq describes Orsenna's political system in Spenglerian fashion—as outdated, petrified and senile.

Orsenna's Signory survives as if in the shadow of a glory accrued in ages past from its military victories over the Infidel and from the fabled profits of its commerce with the East: it resembles an ancient nobleman living withdrawn from the world and sheltered by prestige, despite the loss of his credit and the ruin of his fortune, from his creditors' depredations; its nugacious activity, still tranquil and almost majestic, is that of a patriarch whose inveterately robust appearance generates disbelief as to death's gradual progress within his person. Public duties and service to the State, for which the zeal of Orsenna's ancient patriciate has remained legendary, therefore offer few inducements, in this debile condition, to whatever is aspiring and excitable in its young people's impulses: declining years mark the time a man most effectively accedes to duties in Signory (Gracq 1986[1951]: 1).

The recurrent recreation of the past is the ruling principle in Orsenna, as expressed in the Christian formula: “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.” The political body is still operating but in a form of a noble zombie moved only by the inert power of the flow of tradition. The Signory exemplifies structural inertia, i.e. “the tendency of organizations to maintain the status quo or to resist deviating from existing structural schemes. It is manifested in structural resistance against fundamental reorganization, assuming that the core features of organizations change slowly due to inertial pressures” (Schwarz 2010: 4). In other words, structural inertia does not mean that institutions never change, but they only change as a side effect of inertia, and lack the willpower for self-induced change. Politically, Orsenna is a gerontocracy, which further increases the sense of inadequacy and senility and blocks the introduction of youth and energy into the political system.

The Spenglerian quality of civilization is repetition—constant homage to the past without recreating its spirit. Traditions are maintained or reinvented, but without the inner spirit that originally created and motivated them. In other words, civilization is characterized by the transition from ritual to ritualism. According to Rappaport (1999), ritual constitutes “the performance of more or less invariant

sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (24); thus, rituals are based on supra-individual scripts. They are cultural devices transforming meaningless chaos into meaningful order, producing higher-order meaning (generalized meaning of the universe, human existence, and the whole social system). Ritual is a non-utilitarian and non-rational symbolic act (Bell 2009: 46), a form of communication without information (Rothenbuhler 1998), the ultimate purpose of which is participation in the symbolic universe in which “the individual concerns of daily life are transcended and society is born” (Bellah 2005: 194; cf. Durkheim 1995[1912]). It constitutes, therefore, a community-building and/or community-preserving action that “represent[s], and pass[es] on, the values and orders on which a community is based” (Han 2020: 2). As noted by Byung-Chul Han (2020) in his *The Disappearance of Rituals*, rituals are

symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world. They transform being-in-the-world into a being-at-home. They turn the world into a reliable place. They are to time what a home is to space: they render time habitable. They even make it accessible, like a house. They structure time, furnish it (2).

Over time, rituals can become emptied of content and meaning, impersonal, formal, rigid, sterile, hollow, and boring procedures led more by clichés (Klapp 1986; Zijderveld 1979) than by deeply felt and understood symbols, turning into mere ritualism. Exactly that process is described by Spengler: When culture turns into civilization, it loses its meaning, becoming an empty ceremonial, an artificial mannerism. Gracq depicts this process in his Spenglerian description of Orsenna’s festivities:

The expression of the people in the streets on feast-days – still sumptuous and still faithfully observed – was that of boredom beneath an over-scrupulous imitation of pleasure: this festive garment kept something faded and hopeless about it, like those soldiers’ uniforms which retain the dusty folds and creases of the closet. Loyalty to tradition, having become almost a fetish, expressed the impoverishment of a blood incapable of fresh creations. One was sometimes reminded of those desiccated, well-preserved old men who manage to deceive those around them for some time – as life recedes, they seem to reveal instead, each year more imperiously, more emphatically, the strong and convincing reality of their skeletons: thus it had come about that everywhere abroad the Signory’s constitution was cited as an example of a model political machine, which in actuality functioned for the

satisfaction of connoisseurs with the mocking perfection of a museum piece, as though at the heart of a disturbing void which no longer resolved doubts as to the vigor of the mechanism which still kept it in working order (Gracq 1986[1951]: 46–47).

The seemingly vivid recreation of noble traditions is here depicted as sterile, mechanical, and boring. The civilization cultivates its own funeral, its own past perfection mummified in the form of ritual ennui (as if boredom would be a mandatory element of everything serious, noble, and important without which it would lose its gravity). The civilization is boring and its demise shows through its noble façade. The picture of Orsenna is that of decadence—past glory is cherished but faded, fertile lands have turned into sterile sands, life is withdrawn from it “as if the too-niggardly blood of a mummified body politic no longer circulated in them” (Gracq 1986[1951]: 4). Orsenna is bored, state functionaries are sentenced to years of interminable ennui, and the city, as well as its provinces, is as exhausted as an old man after an active and adventurous life in which he actualized his soul, achieved his goals, and finally reached his end. Maremma, the provincial capital of Syrtes, resembling the collapsing Venice, is depicted in exactly this manner, as the decomposing body of an old man. As Aldo characterizes it:

(...) an instinct suddenly revealed to me as if to a visionary the threatened city, great pieces of its ruined crust collapsing into these swamps of which it had been the ultimate flowering. Like the face of a woman still beautiful yet irremediably aging, suddenly revealed by the tragic light of dawn in all its crackled horror. Orsenna’s countenance confessed its exhaustion to me, a breath of remote annunciation passed through me, warning that the city had lived too long, that its hour had come, and as I struggled against it during those murky nights when all betrayals are declared, I felt that the forces which had hitherto sustained it were changing camp (Gracq 1986[1951]: 45).

The suggestions that the city has already lived too long are frequent in *Le Rivage des Syrtes*. Daniello, the grey eminence of Signory, tells Aldo that solitude and boredom is “what happens to something that’s felt itself gathered together too long” (Gracq 1986[1951]: 288). The inevitable lot of empires, according to Daniello, is boredom, and Orsenna seems to actually “commit suicide little by little through boredom” (Diothyne 2012). On the one hand, boredom is a kind of listlessness, numbness, lethargy, stagnation, paralysis, and indifference, which seems to be a suitable description of Orsenna’s state. Yet, on the other hand, for boredom an essential element is also restlessness and agitation. In that way, boredom is simultaneously

a deactivating and activating mood (see further discussion in Finkielstein 2021: 73–74). In this exact sense, Orsenna is committing suicide through boredom. It stands still as if half-dead, but constitutes the kind of zombie who actively pushes events in the direction of self-annihilation: “Its boredom has decided to invite doom upon itself” (Anderson 2001). Saying this, we might conclude that boredom may be a probable cause of the fall of civilizations, epitomized by the collapse of empires.

Boredom of Decadence.

Spengler is only one of many thinkers who advocate “mystical” explanations of the collapse of civilizations. Others included Arnold Toynbee, who ascribed civilization’s demise to “loss of creative power in the souls of the creative individuals, or the creative minorities...” (1962[1934] (IV): 5 in Tainter 1988: 80) and Alfred Kroeber (1944), who analysed cycles of creativity in such areas as art, science, and philosophy, concluding that they all show a common pattern: from development to repetition, imitation, and ultimate decline. Such explanations predominantly rely on concepts such as senility, vigour, and decadence. Such theories “are united in their lack of concern with empirically knowable or observable factors, and in their reliance on an author’s subjective assessment of individual societies” (Tainter 1988: 74). Literature is also a subjective endeavour, and Julien Gracq’s *Le Rivage des Syrtes* is an eminent literary illustration of such mystical explanations/theories of civilization demise. The set of closely-related concepts of “decline,” “decay,” “demise,” “degeneration,” and “decadence” are central to the author’s vision in the novel, even if they are not always directly employed in the text. The society as a body is one of the major metaphors in the book—Orsenna is decomposing like a spiritless body. It is a decadent society and not coincidentally so visibly resembles Venice, a symbol or an icon of modern decadence. As Jeffrey Sachs (2019) states, “[w]e might define decadence loosely as a classifier for categorizing pathological social conditions that catalyse ‘decline’; identifying sites of actual or theoretical contamination; or identifying harbingers of more widespread deterioration” (248). Weir (2018) identifies such decline-catalyzing social conditions with the Durkheimian concept of anomie.

Émile Durkheim’s concept of anomie-normlessness “denotes a situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behavior” (Seaman 1959: 787). Anomie is etymologically derived from the Greek word *nomos* (law, order) where the prefix a- denotes “without” or “absence of.” Thus, anomie is a state of lawlessness and insufficiency of order. In such a situation, the individual is no longer certain about which rules are to be followed and cannot see any steady norms that could

serve as guidance; social regulation, i.e., the degree of external constraint over an individual, is low. Such a situation was attributed by Durkheim to rapid social change in modern times, when old rules of conduct are no longer valid but the new ones are not yet established and clarified. Despite not being in a state of rapid social change, Orsenna, to some extent, seems to be an example of an anomic state of society—the old rules are executed but they are emptied of meaning and no longer are able to steer people's behaviour. The façade is still there but the void lies behind it. In this very situation, people begin to aspire to something beyond their reality (the restless part of boredom is responsible for that). In Gracq's novel it can be seen in the semi-secret, sectarian religiosity centred around Saint John Damascene's church and the feverish mood of expectations concerning breaking the stalemate of Orsenna's semi-dead existence. Hidden cravings and appetites lack the regulatory force that used to put constraints on human aspirations. One of many outcomes of such an anomic situation may be boredom, as expectations become higher and higher, and everyday reality becomes increasingly unsatisfactory in comparison. This boredom is associated with the sense of meaninglessness and indifference that governs the actions of the novel's protagonists: Aldo, Vanessa, and Danielo.

Durkheim (2005[1897]) conceptualized anomie as a social state and applied this conceptualization to his analysis of suicide in society. However, subsequent generations of sociologists also employed the concept with reference to the individual. Some theorists claim that social normlessness is one of the causes of boredom (Barbalet 1999; Loukidou 2008), while others regard it as an individual manifestation of anomie, reflecting normlessness at the individual level (Darden & Marks 1999). On an individual level, anomie begets boredom, which possesses a liminal/transitional nature (see Finkielsztein 2021: 76–77). It is prevalent in situations in which the past is “no more” and the future is “not yet” (Frederiksen 2013: 6). Thus, boredom is characteristic of ongoing transitions that hinder the process of personal development. It may emerge during major life changes when old patterns have ceased and new ones have yet to be established. In this sense, boredom may be characterized a sense of uncertainty, as exemplified by the situations faced by the main characters in Gracq's novel.

Another element of decadence presented, or at least suggested, in the novel is the peculiar collective mood of Orsenna's citizens. According to Spengler, each epoch possesses its own vision of the world and collective mentality that permeates society and guides its actions. This collective mentality that determines attitudes, dictates choices, reinforces superstitions, and guides social movements is a fact of civilization. The way in which a society reacts to current events, to the pressures it faces as a result of these events, and to the decisions it must make as

a result depends less on logic or even on selfishly conceived interests than on an often intangible imperative emanating from the collective subconscious.

In the case of Orsenna, the collective mood seems to be one of boredom, languor, and anticipation. The novel embodies the popular 20th-century motif of “waiting for barbarians”—the struggle between historical tradition and order (Orsenna) and the irrational and ahistorical (Farghestan). Barbarians also symbolize the end of the old, the boring, and the sterile, while signifying change, new beginnings, and hope. People in such regimes are so bored by the status quo, so exhausted by the monotonous and pointless character of their lives within the empire/civilization that they either passively allow it to fall (like the late Roman elites of the Western Empire) or they actively seek alternative values that might be destructive or oppositional to their own civilization. Examples of such positions can be seen in Tacitus’ praise of barbaric Germanic tribes in comparison to the slothful, rotten, and virtueless life of Roman elites in the first century of the Roman Empire, or the conversions to Islam by representatives of the Western world today motivated by their opposition to consumerist, capitalistic, spiritless Western culture (similar role Christianity played in the late Roman Empire). In this second case, boredom with their own civilization might result in terrorism and active resistance against the civilization that spreads boredom as it supersedes meaning with mere function (Zijderveld 1979), as seen in current Western capitalist society. In Hegelian (1956[1837]) terms, we might say that the private interests of citizens (for instance, in living personally meaningful lives) are not congruent with the interests of the state (or economic system). Mild boredom stemming from political and social stability is essential for the social system as a whole, but might be detrimental for citizens who seek change and meaning. In general, civilizations decay when people do not care and have no particular interest in their maintenance (the example of which may be Joseph Roth’s novel *Radetzky March* depicting the decadent Austro-Hungarian Empire). The illustration of that attitude may be Paul Verlaine’s [1884] poem *Langueur*, in which he wrote:

Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence,
Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs
En composant des acrostiches indolents
D’un style d’or où la langueur du soleil danse.

(I am the Empire in the last of its decline,
That sees the tall, fair-haired Barbarians pass, - the while
Composing indolent acrostics, in a style
Of gold, with languid sunshine dancing in each line.)

L'âme seulette a mal au cœur d'un ennui dense.
Là-bas on dit qu'il est de longs combats sanglants.
Ô n'y pouvoir, étant si faible aux vœux si lents,
Ô n'y vouloir fleurir un peu cette existence!

(The solitary soul is heart-sick with a vile
Ennui. Down yon, they say, War's torches bloody shine.
Alas, to be so faint of will, one must resign
The chance of brave adventure in the splendid file)
(in Weir 2018: 9)

Verlaine paints here a picture of the demise of empire: barbarians pass through the state's territories, bloody battles are fought, and the empire's existence is threatened. Meanwhile, the bored elite composes elaborate poems out of languor, boredom, and melancholy. Such a state results from a moral crisis stemming from detachment from the rest of society. The apocalypse unfolds around them, but they do not care. The decadent elite is indifferent, bereft of will, existentially bored, skeptical, pessimistic, and nihilistic.

Bored and Nihilistic Elite.

In *Le Rivage des Syrtes*, the upper classes have become profoundly skeptical and bored as the formalistic system of political institutions inhibits their personal growth and realization of their goals and aspirations. Orsenna's power system is essentially a gerontocracy, as positions in the Signory are limited and vacancies happen only when someone dies. Skepticism and indifference also grow because "the meticulous service regulations had grown more demanding and a pitiless point of honor was attached to their strict execution" (Gracq 1986[1951]: 47). The elite is stagnant, new blood is never incorporated into it, the circulation of elites (Pareto 1935[1916]) is not occurring. The majority of the elite, especially its younger generation, lacks meaningful ways to engage with and contribute to the political system. This can lead to the pursuit of ambitions elsewhere (e.g., in commerce), or even the complete abandonment of ambition and pursuit of a life of boring hedonism. As Aldo notes,

I participated wholeheartedly in their feverish diversions, their enthusiasms of a day, their passions of a week – a precocious yawn rewards an elite too long enthroned upon the height, and I soon took part in those delights on which the city's jeunesse dorée prided itself:

delights of the higher boredom [*ennui supérieur*](Gracq 1986[1951]:
2)

Boredom in Orsenna is equally a privilege and a curse of the ruling class, as they have grown exhausted and deeply bored. They waste their lives on empty indulgences such as promiscuity, hunting, and overconsumption. Their ennui is responsible for their “cravings for travel, (...) the cosmopolitan spirit, the bizarre whims now beginning to depopulate, in one place after the next, this anthill all too ingeniously arranged – as if the blood had coursed to the skin to be refreshed – by the wandering humor which had seized upon the most cultivated minds” (Gracq 1986[1951]: 47). Civic life is dying and bored elites seek pleasure and adventures outside the capital, living in the margins of its political and social system. They are blasé and indifferent, suffering from debilitating and paralyzing boredom eventuating in the attitude of total carelessness. Aldo provides an example of this:

It so happened that my mistress forsook me: at first such a defection struck me as no more than a matter of caprice, and I grew troubled only upon realizing, suddenly, how little inclined I was to take another. This banal obstacle to preoccupations whose rhythm had, without my knowing it, gradually but excessively slowed, all at once wreaked havoc upon what only a few days before I had regarded as an acceptable existence: my life seemed to me irreparably blighted – the very ground upon which I had so negligently built was giving way beneath my feet. Out of the blue I longed to travel, and sought from the Signory an assignment to some remote province (Gracq 1986[1951]: 2).

The indifference and deep boredom associated with the ultimate meaninglessness of his hedonistic life leads Aldo to his post as a secret observer for the Signory—yet the assignment proves even more boring and empty than his previous life as a party animal. Boredom of affluence and abundance is replaced by the boredom of a meaningless void and futile anticipation.

In short, the social elite in Orsenna is deeply bored. And where profound boredom resides, there is a risk of nihilism. According to Martin Heidegger (1995: 145), boredom is a fundamental mood that reveals nothingness. In other words, it “naturally orientates us to the truth of nihilism” (Tartaglia 2016: 37). Both boredom and nihilism are based on the deeply-felt sense of existence having no meaning, “no ultimate purpose, no sustaining principle of order” (Glicksberg 1975: 12). Such a spiritual crisis manifests as “nihilistic disillusionment,” when “one realizes that becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing” (Glicksberg 1975: 22). If nothing has meaning and everything is worth nothing, there is no difference between

one political or social reality and another. Thus, it does not matter to Orsenna's citizens whether it would prevail or Farghestan destroys it, as new regimes are usually slightly less boring than those they replace. Alternative realities equally do not matter. Nihilism reveals the fact that our values and aspirations cannot be actualized in either a meaningless world or an other-worldly and ideal one, as one ceases to believe in any kind of heaven. Nihilism can take on (a) "the passive form of a weary resignation" (Tartaglia 2016: 37) as "a general cultural mood of weariness, exhaustion and fatigue" (Critchley 1997: 8), or (b) "the active form of a desire to destroy" (Tartaglia 2016: 37), as in Russian anarchism. Gracq presents the resigned nihilistic elite eagerly awaiting change, deeply exhausted by their lack of influence, agency, and prospects. They resemble Dostoevsky's nihilistic hero, Nikolai Stavrogin, "devoid of will," deeply "bored by the spectacle life has to offer," suffering "from the spleen, from acedia, the deadly sin of sloth" (Glicksberg 1975: 75), involved in distractions and empty busyness, consumed by horror loci (the fear of staying in one place) and passive anticipation. On the other hand, some, like Vanessa and her numerous associates, "choose" an active form of nihilism, plotting against Orsenna in order to destroy it, or, like Danielo, they welcome doom as the inevitable and beneficial purification that would provide them with just a slight hope for regaining meaning. Therefore, whether in a passive or active manner, the society of Orsenna seems to suffer from the disease of nihilism, experiencing what I might be inclined to call societal existential boredom.

Another interesting issue is nihilism in a particular Nietzschean sense, understood as focusing on what is imaginary and consequently lacking interest in worldly affairs. Boredom with life, satiation, fatigue with all that is meaningless results in turning away from the world. In Gracq's novel, there is no particular information about the state religion and religious practices with exception of a semi-secret cult centred around Saint John Damascene's church in Maremma, which spreads millenarian ideas about the end of time and the anticipation of a new world order. The anticipation of the end, millenarian imagery, and abandonment of reality are elements of the role of religiosity in the demise of empires. Millenarian sects desire and wait for the end of the world, seek rebirth in a new order of things. They despise the physical and tangible political and social reality. If such cults become widespread, the state is weakened. We can interpret Gracq's cult of Saint Damascene from a Gibbonian perspective. Edward Gibbon (2001[1776]) associated Christianity with the corruption and degeneracy of the Roman Empire. According to Gibbon, Christianity had a corrosive effect on the empire because its core claim was the focus on the afterlife, which "obviates the need for action in the present" (Weir 2018: 43), and decreases military spirit and active virtues of society. Similarly, the military spirit is absent in Orsenna, whose soldiers have become agricultural labourers. Every clue in the novel suggests the

inevitability of Orsenna's defeat in the anticipated confrontation with Farghestan. The conspiratorial or passive elite, the spiritual rejection of the world, the millenarian mood among common people, and the pervasive sense of boredom discreetly felt throughout the novel are visible signs of the demise of Orsenna's empire and statehood.

Boredom of Empire.

It can be argued that the boredom Orsennan society inflicts on rulers and subjects alike is not merely a correlate of Orsenna's demise, but its cause. This is how the office duties in Syrtes, where Aldo was sent by the Signory, are described:

State functionaries ordinarily regard Syrtes as a purgatory in which to expiate some defection of service by years of interminable ennui: to those who remain there by choice the capital attributes provincial, even half-savage tastes – the journey “down to Syrtes,” when commanded, is accompanied by an endless cortege of witticisms (Gracq 1986[1951]: 4).

We can draw a parallel to the British Empire in the 19th century, definitely in its decadent phase, as described by Jeffrey Auerbach (2018) in his book *Imperial Boredom*. As he summarizes the Empire:

a significant and overlooked feature of the nineteenth-century British imperial experience was boredom and disappointment. Diaries, letters, memoirs, and illustrated travel accounts, both published and unpublished, demonstrate that all across the empire, British men and women found the landscape monotonous, the physical and psychological distance from home enervating, the routines of everyday life tedious, and their work dull and unfulfilling (...) Boredom, in short, was neither peripheral nor incidental to the experience of empire; it was central to it, perhaps even the defining characteristic of it (Auerbach 2018: 3).

To be more precise, boredom is a defining feature of empires in their decadent phase, when the thrill of conquest has ended and the pale everydayness of administering and governance prevails. In the case of the British Empire, this shift occurred in the mid-19th century, when “the British established their global hegemony, relying less and less on the support of indigenous rulers, capital, and military personnel, and moving increasingly to establish centralized administrative rule” (Auerbach

2018: 103). Increasingly, the “bureaucratic and ceremonial nature of imperial service” (Auerbach 2018: 103) was the main manifestation of that change, keeping both governors and lower colonial officials of the Crown chronically bored. For governors, the growing diffuse of decision-making in the Empire (thanks to the advances in communication and transport) left them with less and less influence and autonomy. For average officials, life in the colonies was boring, alienating, and lonely, as so vividly depicted, among many others, in George Orwell’s (1974[1934]) *Burmese Days*.

The majority of, if not all, officials of the British Empire suffered deep boredom and disappointment due to the unmet expectations.

Many young men went overseas to advance their careers, pursue economic riches, or seek adventure. They had been promised jobs, tiger hunts, and skirmishes with savage tribesmen;/ what they often found was poverty, fruitless day hacking through the jungle, and interminable hours sitting in tents or marching across dusty plains, all of which led them to express feelings of boredom with their lives, and with the disappointing, unsatisfying situations in which they found themselves (Auerbach 2018: 180–181).

Administering the empire is especially boring when it is advertised with shining, but often empty, promises of personal growth, adventure, and discovery. This is true of all centralized empires. When there is one centre of power around which everything else revolves, every place other than this centre becomes a province. Imperial boredom is just provincial boredom on an imperial scale amplified by the vision disseminated by the centre that raise people’s aspirations and expectations, only to be sold boring and devastating jobs. As Saikat Majumdar (2013) concludes, boredom was

the affective consequence of life in the far provinces of the historical British Empire, where the deadening tedium of the everyday contrasts with the social and historical excitement of the imperial metropolis. It is a tedium that betrays the exotic romance of empire as promised by popular fiction and exhibitions, juvenile literature, music hall entertainment, radio, advertising, film and organizations such as the Boy Scouts (72).

“The oppressive banalization of everyday life on the margins of empire” was felt also by the “large groups of colonized people [who] etch their self-image through a sense of the banality of their individual and collective lives against the magnetic

epicenter of historical, social, and cultural phenomena represented in the metropolitan center of empire” (Majumdar 2013: 3). The empire was also boring for its indigenous subjects, who were sentenced to dull, monotonous, banal, anemic, and inert lives (Auerbach 2018: 9). Imperial indigenous boredom vastly contributed to the lack of loyalty of so many British colonial subjects. When we factor in low morale of colonial officials, bored to death, we can understand the inevitability of the fall of the British empire. A parallel situation may be observed in the literary vision of Gracq—Orsenna’s empire is boring and its citizens are so bored that the spectacle of its destruction by barbarians, its prospective consumption by the fires of war, or mere anticipation of it, seem pleasurable to them. Such great boredom is what might have “dictated” to Nero to enjoy the great fire of Rome, and Gracq leaves us with the great anticipation of the doom as something desired in comparison to the (semi-)dead, sterile, and boring political and societal landscape of mummified Orsenna.

Conclusion. Collective mood of existential boredom

Le Rivage des Syrtes is a great literary illustration of the theories of civilization demise, especially that of Oswald Spengler. It depicts a decadent society with a bored and nihilistic elite in a state of internal decomposition suffering from a sort of societal existential boredom. Existential boredom (also: profound, metaphysical, or hyper-boredom) is a philosophical term describing boredom as an existential state/mood that assails all aspects of the individual’s life, being the direct or indirect outcome of intellectualization or (quasi-)philosophical reflection on the meaning of one’s life (Svendson 2005). As I have written elsewhere, “This attitude may take a more specific form (life in general can have some meaning but mine has none) or a more general form (life as such is meaningless, empty, worthless, and nothing can change it)” (Finkielstein 2021: 47). Existential boredom is described as “an agonizing and chronically painful disease” (Healy 1984: 28) that turns existence into a despised burden. We could say the same about such boredom on a group/societal level. If a group can share positive or negative affective states (e.g., emotional energy, see Collins 2004), we may assume that it is possible to share moods (e.g., resignation, fatalism, boredom, or optimism). Research suggests that a social mood “determines various types of social actions in the areas of finance, culture, and macroeconomics”—it influences consumers’, investors’, and corporate managers’ decisions (Olson 2006: 194). Specifically, the mood of boredom may be a social mood of some historical periods—for instance, fin de siècle and the years predating the outbreak of the First World War (Kustermans & Ringmar 2011), which Gracq’s novel resembles. Boredom as a collective mood plays an important part in the theory of Wolf Lepenies (1992), where it is regarded as an outcome

of one's reflection on the significant systemic constraints of one's social position. The members of a given group experience inhibition of action, which prompts a sense of powerlessness associated with the lack of freedom and control and, by the same token, the lack of agency. Lepenies described this mood among the French aristocracy in the 17th century and German nobility in the 19th century. I suppose that this is what Gracq provides us in his most well-known novel, *Le Rivage des Syrtes*—the description of a social/collective mood resembling what we call existential boredom on an individual level. When more than one person, influenced both independently and by others, perceives their society, state, empire as meaningless, absurd, and unworthy of maintaining, we can conclude that we are facing a state of societal existential boredom.

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