

# Introduction

*Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,  
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower  
Of facts . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined.  
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill  
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom  
To weave it into fabric.<sup>1</sup>*

JACQUES ELLUL IS ONE of the looms of the last one hundred years. If you are looking for a single-source “guide for the perplexed” to understand what just happened in the twentieth century, what it means, and what can be done about it, he is one of a handful of individuals whose writings should be studied. He did not know everything, and he did not interpret everything accurately, but he was one of the world’s last great polymaths and one of the most salient Christian thinkers of his era. With a goal of offering a comprehensive appraisal of the modern world, and of the place of Christian faith in it, he wrote over fifty books and a thousand articles. He addressed almost every major facet and institution of modern society and many more from previous ages. He engaged his material with simplicity, sincerity, courage, and a passion that few have matched. As he wrote in the introduction to one of his most widely acclaimed books,

I try to do here the same thing I do in all my books: face, alone, this world I live in, try to understand it, and confront it with another reality I live in, but which is utterly unverifiable. Taking my place at the level of the simplest of daily experiences, I make my way without critical weapons. Not as a scientist, but as an ordinary

1. Edna St. Vincent Millay, from *Huntsman, What Quarry?*, cited in Postman, “Science and the Story We Need,” 29.

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person, without scientific pretensions, talking about what we all experience. I feel, listen, and look.<sup>2</sup>

His remarkably broad field of vision, his clarity of focus, and his boldly prophetic voice make his work worth reading and considering, rereading and discussing.

Ellul's thinking is simultaneously quite dark and relentlessly hopeful, revealing a powerful tension that is both shocking and discomfiting to those who think they know Ellul by virtue of having followed only one or two threads of his complex oeuvre. This book offers an analysis and assessment of the most important themes in Ellul's work. It aims to orient readers in such a way as to invite further exploration. Put simply, if Ellul is one of the few remarkably good entry points for understanding the facts, figures, forces, and consequences of the last century, then this book aims to be the entry point for understanding Ellul. If Ellul offers themes and threads by which one might understand late modern society, we hope to offer themes and threads by which one might understand and more fruitfully appropriate Ellul.

As we have taught university-level courses on Ellul, we have realized the need for this book, since there is no single-volume introduction to his ideas and their significance. Because there seems to be the sociological Ellul and the theological Ellul, the technological Ellul and the ethical Ellul, the personal Ellul and the political Ellul—and a few more Elluls in between—we have endeavored to shine what collective, cross-disciplinary understanding we have on his life and work in order to bring a fuller, more robust, and more realistic Ellul into the light. It is our hope that you will find here a voice worth listening to, a mind worth engaging, and a man for our times.

2. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 1.