

A Meteor Amidst the Ruins:

Nietzsche on Decadence

When Walter Kaufmann (1950) rescued Nietzsche from his Nazi appropriators, he did so at an interpretive cost.¹ To shield the German philosopher from unpleasant accusations, Kaufmann reconstructed Nietzsche as a precursor of existentialism, as a humanist interested in the revival of an apolitical, or indeed anti-political, high culture. For Kaufmann, to the extent that Nietzsche disdained democracy, praised tyrants, lamented the mediocrity of the many, or sought the re-assertion of natural hierarchies against the mirage of convention, he did so as an aesthete, as a literary stylist who shocked his readers into questioning the dogmas of their time. This refusal to contend with Nietzsche's politics — or, more modestly, this desire to domesticate the content of Nietzsche's politics — cast a long shadow over dominant interpretations in the twentieth century.

In France, Deleuze and Foucault developed a post-modern account of Nietzsche, turning the philosopher into a dissident who celebrated distinctiveness against the pressures of discipline. Asked to describe his own work, Foucault declared that he was “simply a Nietzschean” who, by demonstrating that systems of domination lurk behind “rational” values, followed in the footsteps of his German predecessor.² On the other side of the Atlantic, Richard Rorty used Nietzsche to criticize the fanaticism of those who delude themselves into thinking that every society needs “Rational First Principles” where “Nietzsche and Dewey... forbid [us] to say this kind of thing.”³ Bernard Williams, for his part, wrote that Nietzsche “did not offer a politics” at

¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

² See Hans Sluga, “I am simply a Nietzschean,” in Timothy O’Leary and Christopher Falzon (eds.), *Foucault and Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 36-59; Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

all, a pronouncement with which Alexander Nehamas and Brian Leiter agree.⁴ Bonnie Honig, Wendy Brown, Dana Villa, William Connolly, and Mark Warren went so far as to enlist Nietzsche in an attempt to re-found American democracy on an agonistic basis.⁵ Apolitical philosopher, anti-political aesthete, bohemian artist, heterodox dissident, or critical theorist, the Nietzsche who emerged out of these interpretive traditions seems remarkably far from, if not diametrically opposed to, the “aristocratic radical” whom Georg Brandes, Nietzsche’s first translator, described with admiration — and with approbation from the man himself.⁶

In more recent years, to rescue Nietzsche from his rescuers, a new wave of readers has placed politics at the heart of Nietzsche’s philosophical enterprise. Against the “hermeneutics of innocence,” Domenico Losurdo presents Nietzsche as a thoroughly political animal who saw democracy and liberalism as symptoms of decline, remnants from the carcass of Christianity’s levelling impulse.⁷ Similarly, Malcolm Bull claims that “equality has had no fiercer critic than Nietzsche, whose ‘fundamental insight with respect to the genealogy of morals’ is that social inequality is the source of our value concepts, and the necessary condition of value itself.”⁸ Ronald Beiner even argues that the contemporary far right owes much to Nietzsche, thereby reducing his work to a dangerous brand of anti-egalitarianism hiding behind virtuosic prose.⁹ Less zealous than the others, Hugo Drochon provides a contextualist account of Nietzsche’s politics, relating his critique of Bismarck’s Germany to more conventionally philosophical themes.¹⁰

Sometimes flirting with the risk of over-correction, these contributions have opened new avenues of Nietzsche scholarship in two key respects. First, they have shown that Nietzsche

⁴ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 10; Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ See Christa Davis Acampora, *Contesting Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁶ Cited in, e.g., Hugo Drochon, *Nietzsche’s Great Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁷ Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel: Intellectual Biography and Critical Balance-Sheet*, trans. Gregor Benton (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

⁸ Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche* (New York: Verso Books, 2004).

⁹ Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Hugo Drochon, *Nietzsche’s Great Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

deserves consideration as a political thinker. Second, they have resisted attempts to periodize his work. Following a long line of scholars, Keith-Answell Pearson, for instance, holds that the Nietzsche of the middle period (1878-1882) champions “the aims of the Enlightenment” and defends “the cause of a rationalist, critical theory.”¹¹ Against this line of interpretation, Drochon marshals considerable evidence to show that “Nietzsche’s goal with his revaluation project... remain[s] the same as that of *The Birth*: restoring a healthy culture as the ancient Greeks had from which true philosophy can grow.”¹² The means might differ, but the end remains. To the extent that Nietzsche adopts a less political stance at different points in his life, he does so out of despair, not out of conviction. This frame, which puts the question of decadence at the center of Nietzsche’s thought, avoids the excesses of both strictly political and strictly philosophical readings. Against more political readers, Drochon defends a Nietzsche whose primary concern remains the possibility of philosophy, art, and culture. Against more philosophical readers, Drochon admits that Nietzsche *does* have a political project, one that seeks to restore the pre-conditions of culture and philosophy.

This article begins with Drochon’s frame, but offers a new account of decadence in Nietzsche. Focusing on Nietzsche’s critique of Athenian decline, Drochon argues that, for the German philosopher, “one does not reestablish a healthy culture through... philosophy; rather, one must first restore the healthy instincts that are a prerequisite to a healthy culture.”¹³ In this picture, Nietzsche believes that decadent times simply cannot produce great artists, philosophers, or heroes. To the extent that such personalities emerge at all, they do so by accident, and never reach the full development of their capacities, which the mediocrity of their time constrains. Politics matters because *only* through politics can we restore the kind of culture in which geniuses thrive unchaperoned. Socrates fails because he deludes himself into believing that the dialectic

¹¹ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹² *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

can save Athens, just as romantic artists delude themselves into thinking that art can rescue the world from its pathologies. These hopes, Drochon suggests, are futile: true freedom, true philosophy, and true art all require a healthy culture from which to spring. The best that those who live in decadent times can do, including Nietzsche himself, remains to re-establish the conditions — political and cultural — for such a society. There lies the task of what Drochon calls “Nietzsche’s great politics.”

My account reaches the opposite conclusion. Examining Nietzsche’s depiction of decadence, contemporary and historical, this article defends two claims. First, for Nietzsche, exceptional personalities always transcend their time, for their nature shields them from the spirit of the age. The best philosophers, artists, and heroes — archetypes that Nietzsche often considers as one — never match the pathologies of their contemporaries. They stand above, or apart from, their context. In fact, they only belong to the category of the exceptional *because* they transcend their environment. Second, the Nietzschean hero does not merely emerge despite, but thanks to, decadence. For Nietzsche, decadent times come with the collapse of institutions, conventions, and values; they bring annihilation, turning the achievements of civilization into ruins. This kind of self-destructive milieu proves catastrophic for the many, who err without purpose, no longer revere their superiors, and even come to disdain the very idea of culture. But these do not matter for Nietzsche, who prefers the extraordinary few to the unimpressive many. For the few who live beyond their time, decadence offers the possibility of the highest freedom. The customs and guardrails whose disintegration disarms the many are but chains for the few to unshackle. The heroes whom Nietzsche most admires arise in a decadent age, which they represent precisely insofar as they resist it. Yet this relationship between the arch-individual and his milieu never implies any kind of dependence; if anything, the weakness of the times allows for the most absolute kind of independence and, by extension, of individuality.¹⁴

¹⁴ I use gendered language because Nietzsche’s account of greatness is resolutely gendered. On Nietzsche and gender, see C. Heike Schotten, *Nietzsche’s Revolution: Decadence, Politics, and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

In the first part of the paper, I begin with Nietzsche's writings on the Greeks, on which Drochon draws extensively, to show that Nietzsche *does* lament the effects of decadence on society at large, and *does* deplore the impotence of philosophy in the face of such decline. In the second, however, I turn to Nietzsche's praise of heroes — artists, thinkers, even tyrants — who *only* emerge in the most decadent times. These, I argue, capture another side of Nietzsche's account, namely, the emancipatory potential of decadence for the extraordinary few. Focusing on the state of the society at-large, that is, on the many, would be distinctly un-Nietzschean. The German philosopher obsesses over the fate of the great, a category to which he belongs in his own eyes. To the extent that Nietzsche cares about the ordinary at all, as Drochon admits, he does so to judge societies by the way in which they “recognize and honor” the exceptional.¹⁵ Recasting Nietzsche's politics from the standpoint of the few, I offer an altogether different picture of decadence, not as a time of despair or sclerosis, but as one of vitality, creativity, individuality, and ultimate freedom. This picture, which puts Nietzsche's radical elitism at the heart of his political project, is a concerning one. But it might also provide an account of emancipation — psychological and philosophical — that his more democratic readers can bring to the many.

I - The Impotence of Philosophy

With Drochon, I begin with the assumption that Nietzsche's chief and lifelong concern is “high culture,” or what he otherwise calls “the overall development of humankind.”¹⁶ The idea appears, in many forms and formulations, in both published writings and letters throughout his life. Ten years before his death, Nietzsche writes that “the great, the uncanny problem which I

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶ See Patrick Hassan, “Nietzsche on Human Greatness,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 51 (2017): 293-310.

have been pursuing the longest” is that of the “improvers of humankind.”¹⁷ This obsession does not merely cover high culture but philosophy as such. In one of his earliest essays, “Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks,” Nietzsche already laments the state of philosophy in his time, which shows neither appreciation nor respect for culture. Here as in later writings, the question of high culture, the question of philosophy, and the question of greatness become one and the same. The mediocrity of the age banishes artists, heroes, and philosophers alike. The passage deserves to be quoted at length, for it frames Nietzsche’s thinking on the matter:

A period which suffers from a so-called high general level of liberal education but which is devoid of culture in the sense of a unity of style which characterizes all its life, will not quite know what to do with philosophy and wouldn’t, if the Genius of Truth himself were to proclaim it in the streets and the market places. During such times philosophy remains the learned monologue of the lonely stroller, the accidental loot of the individual, the secret skeleton in the closet, or the harmless chatter between senile academics and children. No one may venture to fulfill philosophy’s law with his own person, no one may live philosophically with that simple loyalty which compelled an ancient, no matter where he was or what he was doing, to deport himself as a Stoic if he once had pledged faith to the Stoa. All modern philosophizing is political, policed by governments, churches, academies, custom, fashion, and human cowardice, all of which limit it to a fake learnedness... Philosophy has no rights, and modern man, if he had any courage or conscience, should really repudiate it... If forced for once to speak out, philosophy might readily say, "Wretched people! Is it my fault if I am roaming the country among you like a cheap fortune-teller? If I must hide and disguise myself as though I were a fallen woman and you my judges? Just look at my sister. Art! Like me, she is in exile among barbarians. We no longer know what to do to save ourselves. True, here among you we have lost all our rights, but the judges who shall restore them to us shall judge you too. And to you they shall say: Go get yourselves a culture. Only then you will find out what philosophy can and will do."¹⁸

¹⁷ *Twilight of the Idols*, “The ‘Improvers’ of Mankind” 5. For translations of the main published works, I use the following editions: Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed., *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Daniel Breazeale, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Marianne Cowan, trans., *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (Washington, DC: Regency Publishing, 1998); Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, eds., *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); R.J. Hollingdale, trans., *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, eds., *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, eds., *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Greg Whitlock, ed., *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans. Greg Whitlock (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Bernard Williams, ed., *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Otherwise, all translations are my own. From this point onwards, works by Nietzsche are cited by title and section name and/or number.

¹⁸ *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 2.

This passage captures three of Nietzsche's core commitments. First, decadent times render philosophy powerless, turning the most brilliant minds into "lonely strollers" who "chatter" among "senile academics." No matter how creative or provocative, philosophy cannot defend itself, let alone rescue society at large. Even "the Genius of Truth himself" would falter at the impossibility of the task. Emptied of all significance, philosophy cannot speak and, to the extent that it can, others have long lost the ability to listen. Second, the pathologies that affect philosophy also plague the arts and, for that matter, all kinds of distinction. Art, philosophy's "sister," joins her "in exile among barbarians," as inapt and homeless as her sibling. The causes of philosophical death are the causes of cultural death; decline comes for all at once. Third, and as a result, philosophy and culture become political in decadent times. "All modern philosophizing is political" because all modern philosophizing confronts the world as it exists. All institutions — "governments, churches, academies, custom, fashion" — conspire to extinguish the flame of philosophy, to prevent philosophers from speaking freely, to deny philosophy any place at all. In this context, defenders of philosophy must preoccupy themselves, first and foremost, with its resurrection. This is a political task with a philosophical aim, or a political task with philosophy *as* its aim. To rediscover the preconditions of philosophy, Nietzsche turns to its birth in ancient Greece. There, the German hopes to find answers about both the nature of philosophy and its condition in decadent times. To cite Drochon once more, "Nietzsche's goal [throughout his life] will remain the same as that of *The Birth*: restoring a healthy culture as the ancient Greeks had from which true philosophy can grow."¹⁹

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche endorses Wagner's claim that only the Greeks have reached the highest form of culture. Wagner himself admires their achievements in the world of drama, a "total artwork" combining dance, music, and poetry into a single expressive medium, as

¹⁹ Nietzsche's *Great Politics*, 25.

Wagner hoped to do in his own work.²⁰ Nietzsche shares this appreciation of tragedy, indeed the highest art form, whose death “left an immense void, deeply felt everywhere.”²¹ In the Greeks, Nietzsche finds a “Dionysian capacity” out of which emerges their artistic genius. Following Wagner, he hopes to revive this capacity, for “in some inaccessible abyss the German spirit still rests and dreams, undestroyed, in glorious health, profundity, and Dionysian strength, like a knight sunk in slumber.”²² Here as in later writings, Greek greatness offers a blueprint for German or European Renaissance. But Nietzsche does not limit his admiration of the Greeks, or his hopes for the present, to merely artistic prowess. As Drochon (2016, 26) puts it, more than fine drama, “the Greeks were also the first to produce something else — something they have so far remained unrivaled at producing: philosophers.”²³

Nietzsche develops this thought in “Philosophy in the Tragic Age,” arguing that the Greeks have “justified philosophy once and for all simply because they have philosophized.”²⁴ In this text, Nietzsche presents his most comprehensive account of the relationship between the health of a society and its ability to produce philosophy. Greek philosophy comes from Greek culture, itself defined by the “unity of style,” a theme to which Nietzsche returns in his first *Untimely Meditation*.²⁵ From the opening lines of the essay, Nietzsche rejects the idea that philosophy can serve a restorative function. Philosophy will no more heal “diseased minds of the Germans” than music (Wagner’s suggestion) or nature (Goethe’s suggestion). Indeed, only in a vibrant, lively culture can philosophy prove “helpful, redeeming, or prophylactic.”²⁶ The Greeks

²⁰ See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Tragedy’s Endurance: Performances of Greek Tragedies and Cultural Identity in Germany since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 69-90.

²¹ *The Birth of Tragedy* 11.

²² *The Birth of Tragedy* 24. Nietzsche has been criticized for his endorsement of Wagner’s project. See Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, “*Zukunftsphilologie*,” in *Der Streit um Nietzsches “Geburt der Tragödie*,” ed. Karlfried Gründer (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1989), 27–55; trans. and ed. Babette Babich, “Future Philology!” *New Nietzsche Studies* 4 (2000): 1–32. Walter Kaufmann in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974) argues that the true ending of *The Birth* should be section 16, as everything that comes after amounts to nothing by an uncritical elegy to Wagner.

²³ *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*, 26.

²⁴ *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 1.

²⁵ See Thomas Leddy, “Nietzsche on Unity of Style,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 21, no. 3 (1995): 553–67.

²⁶ *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 1.

began philosophizing at the “right time,” in the “midst of good fortune, at the peak of mature manhood, as a pursuit springing from the ardent joyousness of courageous and victorious maturity.”²⁷ Their pursuit of philosophy, though they remained “quite unconscious of it,” participated in the “healing and purification of the whole.”²⁸ By contrast, the kind of philosophy that emerges in decadent times tends to destroy philosophy and accelerate the decline of its surroundings. “Where,” Nietzsche asks, “could we find an instance of cultural pathology that philosophy restored to health?” In a sick culture, the putative cure of philosophy becomes a poison more hurtful than the disease. Nietzsche admits that healthy societies can thrive without philosophy; the Romans, he declares, lived their “best period” without it.²⁹ But the reverse does not hold: philosophy cannot thrive in an unhealthy society. As Drochon puts it, an “iron law” binds philosophy to culture. The former cannot survive, breathe, let alone express itself without the latter. Nowhere is this verdict more apparent than in Nietzsche’s view of Socrates, the “good citizen” who deludes himself into believing that dialectics can save Athens, as opposed to Plato, who seeks to overthrow his *polis* to found a new state.³⁰

Scholars have long framed Nietzsche’s relationship to Socrates as tortuous, ambiguous, if not inconsistent. At different points in his corpus, Nietzsche describes Socrates as the worst “villain” in the history of philosophy, or as a “demigod” who stands with Apollo and Dionysus as core sources of inspiration for Nietzsche.³¹ As Drochon notes, far from incoherent, this ambivalence reflects Nietzsche “being of two minds about Socrates,” saluting his provocative spirit and attacks on convention on the one hand, and lamenting his moralism and political submission to the city on the other.³² When Socrates acts as the “critic,” “gadfly,” or “bad

²⁷ Ibid., 1.

²⁸ Ibid., 1.

²⁹ Ibid., 1.

³⁰ See *Lectures on Plato* II 11.

³¹ See, respectively, Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948); Werner Dannhauser, *Nietzsche’s View of Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976); Walter Kaufmann, “Nietzsche’s Attitude toward Socrates,” in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 392.

³² *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*, 29. See also *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 30.

conscience” of his time, he is worthy of admiration.³³ But his method — detachment from the city, obsession with dialogue, obdurate moralism — remains deeply decadent. Indeed, in *The Birth*, Nietzsche presents Socratic philosophy as a symptom of a “degenerate” culture, characterizing the belief that philosophy can reach “into the deepest abysses” and “not only know but... *correct* being” as a “delusion.”³⁴ Contra those who would periodize Nietzsche’s account, he goes even further later, in both the “Self-Criticism” and *Ecce Homo*, framing the character of Socrates as “a sign of decline, of exhaustion, of sickness, of the anarchic dissolution of the instincts,” even “as *the* instrument of Greek disintegration, as a *typical decadent*.”³⁵ In these later writings, Nietzsche explicitly analogizes the limits of the Socratic enterprise with the decrepit state of philosophy in his own time. To the extent that the philosophers of his day still revere Socrates, Nietzsche claims, they do so precisely because they embody the same “degenerate” instincts:

Philosophers and moralists are lying to themselves when they think that they are going to extricate themselves from decadence by waging war on it. Extrication is not in their power; what they choose as a remedy, as an escape, is itself only another expression of decadence—they *change* the way it is expressed, but do not get rid of the thing itself. Socrates was a misunderstanding; *the whole morality of improvement, including that of Christianity, was a misunderstanding*.³⁶

Like the man whom they mistake for the father of philosophy, Germany’s decadent philosophers embrace the absurd idea that philosophy can “improve” humankind, provide a “remedy” for the worst of social pathologies, and “wag[e] war” on decadence. Little do they realize that their delusional attitude itself expresses the decadence which they claim to overcome. Once more, it seems, a healthy philosophy can *only* spring from a healthy culture; the “iron law” binds the philosopher to his milieu. If a few great philosophers continue to emerge amidst declining

³³ See, e.g., *Pre-Platonic Philosophers* Socrates; *Human, All Too Human* 433; *Beyond Good and Evil* 212; *The Case of Wagner* P.

³⁴ *The Birth of Tragedy* 17.

³⁵ My emphasis. *The Birth of Tragedy* Self-Criticism 1 and *Ecce Homo* The Birth of Tragedy 1, respectively.

³⁶ *Twilight of the Idols* Problem 11.

societies, they do so as “chance wanderers,” “lucky hits” who somehow defy the logic of their environment.³⁷ In decadent times, as in Nietzsche’s own, philosophy — to the extent that it remains alive at all, with these “chance wanderers” — must henceforth assume a more assertive, political form. “All modern philosophizing is political,” as Nietzsche reminds his readers. Among the Greeks, Plato, who watched the many condemn his teacher to death for his way of life, is the first to understand this political imperative.

Throughout his corpus, Nietzsche combats the moralism and “degenerate instincts” of Plato.³⁸ In an early note of 1871, he writes that his “philosophy inverted Platonism,” later adding, in the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), that his “task” is to fight Plato’s “dogmatist’s error” of the “invention of pure spirit and the good in itself.”³⁹ Nevertheless, Nietzsche retains a certain appreciation for Plato’s political project. Both Plato and Nietzsche recognize the decline of their respective cultures, and seek to make the world — ancient for Plato, modern for Nietzsche — “safe for philosophy” again. Nietzsche reads Plato’s idea of philosopher-kings as nothing less than a call for regime-change, calling the *Republic* the “secret study of the connection between state and genius.”⁴⁰ Plato, like Nietzsche, believes in restoration against disintegration. Both understand that society as it exists, decadent Athens for Plato, decadent Germany for Nietzsche, cannot be saved.⁴¹ Both acknowledge the impotence of philosophy in the status quo. Both

³⁷ *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*, 35.

³⁸ *Ecce Homo* The Birth of Tragedy 2. There is much disagreement on the nature and extent of Nietzsche’s engagement with Plato’s philosophy. Thomas Brobjer, for instance, claims (in “Nietzsche’s Wrestling with Plato and Platonism,” in *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition*, ed. Paul Bishop ed. [Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004], 241–59) that Nietzsche simply rejected Plato outright, never engaging with his thought on its own terms. Yet one could grant that Nietzsche engaged with Plato precisely insofar as he rejected his philosophy and conception of “being,” as John Richardson argues in “Plato’s Attack on Becoming” and “Nietzsche’s Theory of Becoming,” in *Nietzsche’s System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89–108. Adjudicating between these positions is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, what matters is the area of overlap between these readings, namely, as George Stack puts it in *Lange and Nietzsche* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983), 51, that “[Nietzsche] is not so much concerned with the grounds for Plato’s metaphysics, the arguments he offers in defense of his views, as he is with the reasons why this metaphysics was brought into being and its effects on man and his perception of his place in the universe.” I borrow this point from Drochon’s *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*, 37–8.

³⁹ *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* 7 7 [156]; *Beyond Good and Evil* P.

⁴⁰ *Lectures on Plato* I 2 [II]; *The Gay Science* 173.

⁴¹ See *Lectures on Plato* [III] 23.

struggle against their time and its spirit, envisioning a new age that restores the exceptional to their rightful place, that is, at the helm. Both also write for the “few” who can build this new era.⁴²

Yet two key differences persist. First, Nietzsche disdains the content of Plato’s philosophy, which fetishizes contemplation and lofty, moralistic ideals of “the Good.” Nietzsche places philosophers alongside artists and heroes among the extraordinary few, where Plato prefers philosophy — the genius of “wisdom and knowledge” — to all other forms of genius. Captured by “the Socratic judgment on art, which Plato, struggling against himself, adopt[s] as his own,” Plato banishes the “inspired artist entirely from his state,” precisely the kind of artist whom Nietzsche not only reveres but considers necessary for a healthy culture.⁴³ Put simply, Plato’s moralism leaves no place for greatness, a fatal flaw reflected in his “horribly smug, childlike type of dialectic.”⁴⁴ Second, as Drochon observes, is a difference of emphasis: “Plato wants to begin with philosophy, while Nietzsche wants to start with culture (underpinned by a certain politics).”⁴⁵ Partly because of his inherited obsession with the contemplative life, Plato first develops a “system,” and then searches for the “men, whom he would make into philosophers, so that they can found with him, someday, the new state.”⁴⁶ In Drochon’s account, by contrast, Nietzsche first seeks to restore a “genuine culture,” for only then can philosophers emerge and thrive once more. The “iron law” separates Plato, who holds onto the primacy of philosophy, from Nietzsche, who sees the *politics* of philosophy as the most pressing of concerns.

In fact, for Drochon, Nietzsche *de*-philosophizes Plato’s contribution to retain his political program without its moral commitments. Whenever Nietzsche most admires Plato, he admires him as a “legislator and founder of [a new] state” who “found[s] the Academy” and “writes” not merely as a means of searching for the truth, but as part of “an untiring fight against

⁴² *Lectures on Plato* 2 [V–VII].

⁴³ *The Gay Science* 173.

⁴⁴ *Twilight of the Idols* Ancients 2.

⁴⁵ *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*, 38.

⁴⁶ *Lectures on Plato* I 2 [V].

his time.”⁴⁷ In Nietzsche’s story, Plato is a “political agitator, who wants to change the world in its entirety and is, *amongst other things*, and to that end, a writer. Founding the Academy for him is something much more important: he writes to strengthen in combat his companions of the Academy.”⁴⁸ Plato therefore provides a political end (the re-foundation of the city) and a political means to that end (the training of a new elite, through writing). Far from a space of abstract and passive contemplation, the Academy turns into “sect” where Plato “sows for the future” alongside his “companions.”⁴⁹ More than a reflective act, writing becomes a means of training, of preparation, or even of seduction for disenchanted souls. For Nietzsche, Plato starts writing at the late age of forty-one because then, and only then, does he radicalize his posture towards the city, abandoning the passivity of his teacher Socrates and realizing, as Nietzsche himself does over time, that the overthrow of a sterile order must precede its eventual revitalization. Later in life, Nietzsche frames his own writings as political tools to win over newcomers, even admitting in the review of *Beyond Good and Evil* in *Ecce Homo* that “all [his] writings from this point on have been fish hooks... for anyone who, out of strength, would give me a hand with destruction.”⁵⁰ These are the moments in which Nietzsche most identifies with Plato — not Plato the philosopher, but Plato the political “agitator” who, recognizing the impotence of philosophy in the decadent *polis*, writes to form a “sect” of exceptional men who can re-found the city on different, better terms. For Drochon, this affinity corroborates the thesis that Nietzsche gives up on the possibility of philosophy in decadent times altogether; only the political task remains, without which inertia persists. Apart from these few “chance wanderers” and “lucky hits,” the only way out of the “iron law” is political.

⁴⁷ *Lectures on Plato* II 11.

⁴⁸ *Lectures on Plato* P.

⁴⁹ *Lectures on Plato* I 2 [VII].

⁵⁰ *Ecce Homo* Beyond Good and Evil 1.

II – Decadence as Freedom

The problem with Drochon's account is that, far from irrelevant exceptions who should not distract us from the catastrophe of decadence, the "chance wanderers" represent what matters most to Nietzsche. In this select group belong Alcibiades, Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, Napoleon, Schopenhauer, and, of course, Nietzsche himself. In these figures who emerge in times of decline, Nietzsche finds freedom and individuality in their highest forms. These men, unrepresentative of their era, foreigners in their own city, reach radical independence from convention, from the many, from the state, in short, from all chains that might otherwise tether their individuality. They are both outsiders and products of their context, outsiders because they stand beyond history by nature, and products insofar as the weakness of the age enables their unrestricted expression. Seen through their eyes, decadence does not bring collapse but liberation, either to found something new or to carve their own destiny without impediments. For Nietzsche, this kind of supreme mastery, over self or over others, cannot emerge but amidst the most decadent of societies. If the "iron law" binds *almost* everyone to their time, thereby condemning culture to irrelevance, those who escape from its grip reach true heroism. This shift in emphasis — from the devastation of decadence to its generative potential — does not contradict, so much as it qualifies, Drochon's reading. Nietzsche does deplore the effects of decadence on the many; but he also salutes its emancipatory promise for the few, that is, for those who embody Nietzsche's aspirations to the fullest.⁵¹

Throughout his work, Nietzsche describes those whom he admires most as somehow detached from, or beyond, their time. In an early essay, he praises Schopenhauer by presenting

⁵¹ This interpretation runs counter to more democratic readings such as James Conant, *Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); or David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics, and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995). Both Conant and Owen believe that the great individuals Nietzsche upholds are but exemplars for all to follow. For critiques of this position, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Manuel Knoll, *Nietzsche as Political Philosopher* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

him as the revival of a “truly ancient” sort of philosophical life, at odds with the current age.⁵² He later compares Schopenhauer to Napoleon, another “classical man” who appears as an unexpected meteor, utterly out of place in an age of mediocrity. In the *Genealogy*, Napoleon, “the most isolated and late-born man there has even been,” emerges as a phenomenon new *and* old, the awakening of something ancient, but also the creation of something novel, a “noble ideal... made flesh.”⁵³ Extraordinary men personify both a radical return to antiquity *and* the promise a world altogether different. In fact, Nietzsche describes his own enterprise in these terms. He famously opens *The Anti-Christ* with the declaration that “this book belongs to the rarest of men. Perhaps not one of them is yet alive. First the day after tomorrow must come for me. Some men are born posthumously,” including, we are to understand, Nietzsche himself.⁵⁴ This distinctive class — the “rarest of men,” Nietzsche’s readers of choice, his heroes, his models for the “noble ideal,” those whom Drochon calls “chance wanderers” — is born posthumously amidst the ruins of decadence. In this select company belong the architects of artistic and philosophical rebirth, the Wagnerian avant-gardists “beside which [stand] the name Dionysus,” or the “philosophers of the future” whom the older Nietzsche compares to the “commanders and legislators” of the ancient world, with which they share a view of philosophy as “the most spiritual will to power, to the ‘creation of the world,’ to the *causa prima*.”⁵⁵ In every case, the past and the future unite against a decrepit present. The oldest of dispositions, the “spiritual will to power,” fuels the construction of a new world. The greatest heroes, artists, and philosophers all stand side by side across space and time, creatures of yesterday *and* tomorrow.⁵⁶ Out of their untimely struggle with the world as they find it, enfeebled and crumbling, arises the possibility of the highest freedom.

⁵² *Schopenhauer as Educator*

⁵³ *On the Genealogy of Morality* I 17

⁵⁴ *The Antichrist* P

⁵⁵ *The Birth of Tragedy* 3; *Beyond Good and Evil* 211; *Beyond Good and Evil* 9.

⁵⁶ On this theme, see Michael William Grenke, “Nothing Is True, Not Everything Is Permitted: A Study of Nietzsche’s Opinion of Historical Political Leaders and the Order of Rank,” PhD dissertation (Boston College, 1994), 109-120.

In fact, in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche explicitly rejects the “milieu theory,” the “neurotic’s theory” that geniuses depend on their surroundings and, as such, can only come from healthy societies. As he puts it,

Great human beings are necessary, the age in which they appear is accidental: they almost always become masters of these ages, because they are stronger and older and represent a greater accumulation. The relationship between a genius and his age is like the relation between strong and weak or old and young: the age is always much younger, flimsier, and less self-assured, much more immature and childish.⁵⁷

This passage contradicts the application of Drochon’s “iron law” to the extraordinary few. For those who matter, that is, those to whom Nietzsche entrusts political, artistic, and philosophical renewal, the age remains “accidental.” Nietzsche illustrates this relationship “between the genius and his age” with the example of Napoleon. Revolutionary France, trapped between the Ancien Regime’s frailty and the Republic’s unnatural equality, should have “produced the opposite type of a Napoleon: in fact it *did*,” for almost every Frenchman of the period became unremarkable.⁵⁸ But the unremarkable many do not interest Nietzsche. Precisely because “Napoleon was *different*, the heir to a civilization that was stronger, longer and older than what was dying off in France,” Nietzsche goes on, “he became master, he was the only master there.”⁵⁹ This passage captures Nietzsche’s ambivalent attitude towards decadence. At no point does he deny that revolutionary France, the unhealthy society *par excellence* in his eyes, brought weakness and decay to an otherwise noble “civilization.” Yet his focus remains elsewhere, namely, on the individual genius that the period unleashed because of its decrepitude. Importantly, the relationship between the likes of Napoleon and their time does not merely correspond to that “between strong and weak,” but also that “between old and young.” The untimely character of Napoleon, a “classical man” who personifies a civilization that his contemporaries have long forgotten, enables his rise. For

⁵⁷ *Twilight of the Idols* 44

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

Nietzsche, the singular mastery of Napoleon, which shines brighter than the skirmishes of the period, redeems the Revolution itself.

Nietzsche goes even further in section 200 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, a passage worth quoting at length:

In an age of disintegration... a person will have the legacy of multiple lineages in his body, which means conflicting (and often not merely conflicting) drives and value standards that fight with each other and rarely leave each other alone. A man like this, of late cultures and refracted lights, will typically be a weaker person... But if conflict and war affect such a nature as one *more* stimulus and goad to life –, and if genuine proficiency and finesse in waging war with himself (which is to say: the ability to control and outwit himself) are inherited and cultivated along with his most powerful and irreconcilable drives, then what emerge are those amazing, incomprehensible, and unthinkable ones, those human riddles destined for victory and for seduction; Alcibiades and Caesar are the most exquisite expressions of this type (– and I will gladly set by their side that *first* European after my taste, the Hohenstaufen Frederick II), and among artists perhaps Leonardo da Vinci. They appear in exactly those ages when that weaker type, with his longing for peace, comes to the fore. These types belong together and *derive from the same set of causes*.⁶⁰

For our purposes, the passage's most significant claim lies in the final sentence, in which Nietzsche frames the “age of disintegration” as the *cause* of genius. The people who belong to such an age are “waging war” with themselves. Their instincts, once regulated by institutions that have since crumbled, run amok. The masses, which cannot handle this liberation of all “powerful and irreconcilable drives,” let their contradictions overwhelm them and descend into chaos. Unleashed, their passions enslave them; their weak will succumbs to the worst of instincts and the most vicious of temptations. Politically, this internal tumult translates into instability and “war.” Nevertheless, for the extraordinary few who do not belong to the age, the unleashing of the “drives” enables the highest kind of self-mastery. As with the many, the soul of the few becomes a battlefield of instincts; unlike the many, however, the few win their fight against themselves. They come to “control and outwit” every facet of their being, no longer domesticated by convention or external forces, but by the individual will alone. As a “stimulus”

⁶⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil* 200.

or “goad,” the “age of disintegration” does not “cause” genius by establishing a kind of dependence between heroic men and their time, but by forcing them to confront their own nature without any help, so as to emerge more masterful over themselves and over others. As Nietzsche puts it, genius is “inherited *and* cultivated.” These men might possess the capacity for self-mastery by nature, a capacity that puts them beyond their age; yet only under conditions of turmoil can this capacity reach its full expression. Paradoxically, decadence offers the best kind of cultivation for the exceptional few, namely, *non*-cultivation. The institutions or values that would otherwise have tamed, if not domesticated, the contradictions of the self have fallen; the present withdraws as the forces of the past and of the future, each full of tensions, assert themselves in those who transcend their time. This struggle within the self, which reduces most humans to directionless cattle, reveals the “amazing, incomprehensible, and unthinkable” nature of those “destined for victory.” These three adjectives reflect the insurmountable gap that Nietzsche sees between Alcibiades, Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci and their respective contemporaries. Nietzsche insists on the significance of self-mastery, even using language that borders on hyperbole, because this account of self-mastery corresponds to his later definition of freedom.

In a well-known passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, entitled “My idea of freedom,” Nietzsche opposes liberal definitions of term, which undermine or ignore the inescapably conflictual dimension of freedom. “What is freedom anyway?”, Nietzsche asks. “Having the will to be responsible for yourself. Maintaining the distance that divides us. Becoming indifferent to hardship, cruelty, deprivation, even to life.... Freedom means that the manly instincts which take pleasure in war and victory have gained control over the other instincts.”⁶¹ This definition matches the account of self-mastery from section 200, which also focuses on “control over the other instincts” that weaken the mind. Nietzsche defends a view of freedom as self-mastery, over the external calamities of “hardship, cruelty, deprivation,” as well as over the internal drives that

⁶¹ *Twilight of the Idols* Skirmishes in a War with the Age 38

threaten the supremacy of the will. For Nietzsche, liberalism fails to deliver on its promise of emancipation because, by protecting the autonomy and rights of individuals, it saves them from “the resistance that needs to be overcome,” from “the effort that it costs to stay on top,” from the struggle against the contradictions of the self which, for Nietzsche, acts as the very “measure” of freedom “in individuals and in peoples.” Without this war of instincts, unleashed in full *only* in a decadent age, the possibility of freedom, self-mastery, and, by extension, true individuality disappears.

In fact, in “My idea of freedom,” Nietzsche identifies Julius Caesar, one of the decadent heroes of section 200, as “the most magnificent type” of human being, that is, as one who embodies freedom in its highest form. Why does Caesar personify freedom? “Destined for victory,” he had to struggle against his time and himself, against the decline of Rome and the chaos of his soul, against external mediocrity and internal turmoil, only to achieve mastery over both state and self. This dual thirst for mastery, “psychological” and “political,” is what true freedom entails. The free man rules as a master over “the merciless and terrible instincts that provoke the maximal amount of authority and discipline against themselves,” a process that decadent times bring to its pinnacle. Taken together, section 200 and “My idea of freedom” capture the importance and attraction of decadence for Nietzsche, who does not admire the likes of Caesar out of chauvinistic great-man worship, but because these figures best embody his conception of individuality and freedom as self-mastery. Only among the few who tame the winds of decadence can Nietzsche’s philosophy be made flesh.

Decadent ages do not merely bring self-mastery for the few, but also vitality and creativity. In section 262 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, for instance, Nietzsche emphasizes the dynamism of societies in decline. There, under these “unfavorable conditions,” arises “a [new] species,” a moment that Nietzsche calls a “fortunate time”:

At these turning points of history, a magnificent, diverse, jungle-like growth and upward striving, a kind of *tropical* tempo in the competition to grow will appear alongside (and often mixed up and tangled together with) an immense destruction and self-destruction. This is due to the wild egoisms that are turned explosively against each other, that wrestle each other “for sun and light,” and can no longer derive any limitation, restraint, or refuge from morality as it has existed so far... The “individual” is left standing there, forced to give him- self laws, forced to rely on his own arts and wiles of self-preservation, self-enhancement, self-redemption... a disastrous simultaneity of spring and autumn, filled with new charms and veils that are well suited to the young, still unexhausted, still indefatigable corruption.⁶²

This passage adds another layer to the kind of freedom that decadence enables for the few, which does not merely consist in ascetic self-control, but also of “young, still unexhausted, still indefatigable corruption.” With supreme self-mastery comes an exhilarating feeling of emancipation. Nietzschean philosophers, artists, and heroes do not merely domesticate the conflicts of the age, internal or external, but relish in its chaos, unleashing their “wild egoisms” towards unbridled self-expression. Nietzsche’s emphasis on friction and competition echoes his admiration for the Greek culture of *agon*.⁶³ When a singular personality arises in a decadent age, as with Napoleon in France, he fights against himself and his time, eventually dominating both. When several extraordinary men appear at once, each a remnant of a bygone age, they “wrestle with one another for sun and light,” as the Greeks did, thereby liberating each other from all “limits” and “restraints.” This third dimension of struggle — first within the self, then between the few and their time, now among the few themselves — breathes new life into a fallen culture. With “autumn” comes “spring;” with “annihilation and self-destruction” comes the possibility of political, artistic, and philosophical greatness. For Nietzsche, creation and destruction are one and the same. The struggle for freedom entails the smashing of idols *and* the affirmation of the will. The exceptional few do not merely benefit from the collapse of conventions or institutions, but actively participate in this process of disintegration as they “wrestle... for sun and light,” that is,

⁶² *Beyond Good and Evil* 262. For a similar thought, see *Human All too Human* 224, titled “Ennoblement Through Degeneration.”

⁶³ On this theme, see Yunus Tuncel, *Agon in Nietzsche* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013); Christa Davis Acampora, *Contesting Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

for mastery and expression. This “fortunate time” need not result in renewal for society at-large, but can do so, especially since the agonistic act of wrestling — with the self and with the world — often corresponds to, or even ushers in, “historical turning points.”

Nietzsche returns to this thought in *The Gay Science*, describing the Italian Renaissance as one of these “turning points” emerging out of the struggle between “wild egoisms” and their decadent time.⁶⁴ The central aspirations of the Renaissance — its reverence for the ancients, its desire for the new, its admiration of the strange, its belief in progress, its exploratory spirit — all emanate from the same source: the members of the urban patriciate who cultivated their sense of self, fought against their city’s crumbling institutions, grew tired of conventions, and ultimately brought a new world into being. Borrowing the language of section 262, Nietzsche praises the rulers of Genoa for their “superb, insatiable egoism of the desire to possess and exploit.” In this story, what begins as a search for new lands abroad ends with the thirst for new frontiers of expression, at home and within the self. “These men when abroad recognized no frontiers,” Nietzsche writes, “and in their thirst for the new placed a new world beside the old, so also at home everyone rose up against everyone else, and devised some mode of expressing his superiority, and of placing between himself and his neighbor his personal infinity.”⁶⁵ The example of Genoa captures the unity of self-mastery; in this case, the desire to conquer the unknown world (the “frontier”) *is* the desire to wrestle with the “neighbor” and reach true individuality, this “personal infinity” that sets us apart from the other. Put simply, the same impulse underpins all kinds of genius, political, philosophical, and artistic. The men of Genoa erected a new age out of the ruins of the old, casting their eye “on everything that is built around [them] far and near, and likewise on the city, the sea, and the chain of mountains.”⁶⁶ Explorers or architects, painters or warriors, all “express[ed] power and conquest with [their] gaze.” This “gaze” corresponds to the “manly instincts” from “My idea of freedom,” or to the “unexhausted, still unwearied

⁶⁴ *The Gay Science* 291.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

depravity” of section 262, all of which distinguish the “stronger types” of section 200 from their time. For Nietzsche, decadence not only allows the exceptional few to rise, to struggle within themselves, with their surroundings, and with each other, to reach self-mastery and freedom, but also to *build*, to create while destroying, to engineer the kind of “turning point” that reshapes the course of history in their image. There lies the most significant objection to Drochon’s “iron law” reading, namely, that the emancipatory potential of decadence for the few brings, in some cases as least, the promise of renewal for civilization at-large.

These moments of decadent creativity explain why Nietzsche writes, in “What the Germans Lack,” that “all great ages of culture are ages of political decline: what is great culturally has always been unpolitical, even anti-political.”⁶⁷ Conventional readers treat this passage, which seems to contradict Drochon’s thesis, as evidence that Nietzsche sees the revival of philosophy and the arts as an apolitical enterprise.⁶⁸ As we have seen in the first section, however, this reading is incompatible with Nietzsche’s writings on Greek and German decline. How, then, should we interpret this puzzling statement? As the example of the Renaissance illustrates, Nietzsche views renewal as a task beyond politics, not in the sense of beyond power, but in the sense of beyond institutions and conventions. The exceptional men who build Genoa are “beyond” politics in the way that an eccentric monarch is beyond politics — they make a mockery of the state and its rules, as they do of all norms and limits.⁶⁹ Greatness is not “anti-political” because it seeks neutrality or isolation, but in a more literal sense: the extraordinary few struggle *against* politics, that is, against all existing forms of association, in a decadent age where

⁶⁷ *Twilight of the Idols* What the Germans Lack 4

⁶⁸ For example, see *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*.

⁶⁹ In fact, as we have seen, Nietzsche not only praises tyrants such as Caesar, but cites them alongside artists and philosophers to emphasize that all geniuses belong to the same type, the “stronger type” of section 200. In *Human All Too Human* 261, for instance, Nietzsche calls the earliest and greatest Greek philosophers “tyrants of the spirit.” In this passage, he presents the greatness of Greece as a direct result of the “the violent, rash, and dangerous character” which produces heroes, artists, tyrants, and philosophers alike. A comprehensive analysis of this thought lies beyond the scope of this article. For our purposes, note the parallels between the “violent” character of the Greeks and the “wrestling” of section 262. Here again, and contra Drochon, decadent times come closest to the conditions of Greek greatness in the modern world — though this “violent, rash, and dangerous” disposition is now reserved for the few, whereas in Greece “every Greek wanted to be” and “was” a masterful individual.

the realm of the political, weak and weakening, descends into irrelevance. Among other reasons, individual greatness thrives amidst decadence because collapse emancipates the individual from all ties that would otherwise constitute the political as such. The process of disintegration, which devastates the city, does not merely underpin or facilitate the emancipation of the few; it constitutes emancipation itself. When Nietzsche declares that “all great ages of culture are... anti-political,” he means that the death of politics announces the birth of something higher. Contra Drochon, then, not only can culture emerge from decadent times, but the best kind of culture *only* emerges in decadent times. Decadence does not merely produce Caesar, but also da Vinci — not merely the Empire, but also the Renaissance.

III – The Blessings of Decline

This defense of decadence carries both interpretive and normative implications. If Nietzsche’s aim, from *The Birth* to his revaluation project, remains to restore “a healthy culture... from which true philosophy can grow,” then the question of decadence becomes *the* heart of Nietzsche’s enterprise.⁷⁰ Aesthetic readings à la Kaufmann miss the explicitly political dimension of this quest for renewal; merely political readings à la Beiner miss Nietzsche’s higher aspirations, which have less to do with hierarchy for its own sake than with culture. The prism of decadence avoids both extremes, bringing crucial parts of Nietzsche’s thought into a coherent whole: his encounters with ancient Greece, his relationship with his own time, his thirst for greatness, his definition of freedom, and his conception of philosophy, among others. The question then becomes: which posture did Nietzsche adopt towards decadence? Following Drochon, this article shows that Nietzsche laments the effects of decadence on society at large, and deplores the impotence of philosophy in the face of decline. Contra Drochon, however, this article captures

⁷⁰ Nietzsche’s *Great Politics*, 25.

another side of Nietzsche's account, namely, the emancipatory potential of decadence for the extraordinary few. Recasting Nietzsche's politics from the standpoint of the few, this article offers a more celebratory picture of decadence, one that comes closer to Nietzsche's own obsession with the fate of the great. In Caesar, Alcibiades, da Vinci, and other heroes from decadent times, Nietzsche does not merely find historical figures worthy of admiration, but archetypes that structure his philosophical attitude towards freedom, mastery, self-expression, and art. In other words, around these heroes gravitate concepts that animate the rest of Nietzsche's philosophy, which *only* makes sense in relation to his account of decadence.

On the normative front, Nietzsche offers a counterpoint to conservative and reactionary theories of decadence. In his masterful history of the concept, Julien Freund traces the idea of decadence back to the reception of ancient texts among reactionary thinkers after the French Revolution.⁷¹ This tradition, which extends from Joseph de Maistre to Carl Schmitt to contemporary critics of liberalism, frames modernity as a time of disintegration and despair. Nietzsche has much to share with this diagnosis, but reaches the opposite conclusion by reconsidering decadence from the standpoint of the few. For "stronger types," decadence does not bring sclerosis or loneliness, but vitality, creativity, and freedom. Collapse resuscitates the possibility of *agon*, that is, of struggle. With the decline of institutions comes the possibility of awakening. Customs crumble; "powerful and irreconcilable drives" run amok. Without guidance, the masses succumb to the most vicious of temptations. Nevertheless, as the herd descends into chaos, the spark of individuality ignites — a spark that reactionaries ignore at their peril. Away from the tumults of the moment, philosophers, artists, and heroes emerge as meteors amidst the ruins of civilization, wrestling with the self and the age until they dominate both. They become manifestations of the human spirit in its highest and freest form. They create, destroy, create *while* destroying, and erect a new age out of the carcass of the old. Reactionaries obsess over the ruins

⁷¹ Julien Freund, *La Decadence* (Paris: Sirey, 1984).

themselves. Unbothered, Nietzsche looks to the meteors that redeem the ruins. Whether this redemption can be extended to the many on Nietzsche's terms is doubtful. Whether this redemption can be extended to the many on *our* terms in another matter.