

*Nietzsche on the Decadence
and Flourishing of Culture*
Andrew Huddleston

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The main focus of Andrew Huddleston's book concerns the notion of culture in Nietzsche's philosophy, and the regrettable oversight it has received from recent scholars, who have overwhelmingly favored discussions of Nietzsche's valorization of the "great individual." In doing so, the author pays a great service to a more balanced general comprehension and assessment of Nietzsche, showing a certain degree of courage to approach a concept (that of culture), usually closely associated with Marxist philosophical reflection. We tend to forget that, on the contrary, Nietzsche's philosophical debut—may we say manifesto?—was entirely focused on cultural renovation at large, to the extent that even his conception of the "great individual" of the time—his Schopenhauer-inspired "metaphysics of the genius," notably the artistic genius—shows distinctively supra-individualistic features, with the tragic artist essentially heralding a new era where mankind retrieves an immediate connection with the essence of reality. In this regard, not only is culture a key element of Nietzsche's philosophy, but the decadence and flourishing of culture—the book's subject by its title—was arguably one of

Nietzsche's deepest philosophical preoccupations throughout his entire productive life. Therefore, Huddleston's claim that Nietzsche cannot be judged as a staunch individualist—or at least not just that—is well-supported, just as his suggestion that a paradigm change in Nietzsche studies on this subject would be more than welcome.

The book is to some extent divided in two halves, only the first of which is concerned with the subject of culture at large—and only the fifth chapter, regrettably, directly deals with the subject of the title. This is slowly approached after examining the whole context in which the notion of culture occurs in Nietzsche: its main conceptions, existential and collectivist; the role of *Bildung*; the place and function of the "great individual" in it. The first chapter, focusing mostly on BT, deals with what is arguably Nietzsche's most well-known conception of culture, that is the existential one, meaning it as a social function capable "to provide people with a form of social sustenance" (p. 11). Here the author inevitably deals with some of the most general Nietzschean categories, such as Socrates' legacy for Western civilization, or the Apolline and the Dionysiac, though his rendering of both doesn't always work well. For instance, he seems to think of the Apolline as something that, unlike the Dionysiac, is not concerned with the irrational and creative destruction at large, despite not only Apollonian prophecy and the myths concerning the god bear witness of this, but also the deity's very name, which literally translates as "The one who destroys from afar." We owe to Nietzsche the first serious attempt to know ancient and archaic Greek culture outside (and against) the classicistic conceptual frame, but it is a basic tenet of Nietzsche's view that the Apolline is just as rooted in Greek archaic agonal culture as the Dionysiac is. Therefore, to state that only the Dionysiac knows "suffering, dismemberment, and destruction as aesthetic phenomena" (p. 18) seems at odds with archaic Greek culture, where form, with its calculated harmony—the veil of beauty that hides the horrible truth of the meaninglessness of existence and reality as a whole—originates from chaos just as the formless terror of the Dionysiac. Indeed, the Greek state—the Apollonian institution *par excellence*—is clearly shown, in Nietzsche's eponymous

juvenile treaty, as representing and embodying terror and cruelty, features that, as a consequence, must be necessarily ascribed to the Apolline too. As for Socratism, it would have been important to underline not only the illusory reality of the attempt laboriously enacted by Plato's master, but also its essentially *violent* nature: "finding truth at all costs" meant, for Socrates, "establishing truth at all costs," i.e. to hubristically impose a set of values by virtue of his exceptional dialectics. (Even the *Apology* hints at such hybris in some passages.) This is precisely what Nietzsche will later reproach to the "sacerdotal spirit", responsible for the death (by vampirism) of the great pagan aristocratic societies of the past: not that it did not apply a strong will of power, but that it did so in a convoluted, contorted, and eventually self-destructive way. Socrates is indeed the first in a very long line to replace the Dionysiac and "aristocracy of spirit" with decadent values and world views half out of self-deception, and half out of willing trickery. This short-circuit between the two manifests the sickness that essentially affects the "sacerdotal spirit." Another question that is left somehow suspended is the importance given by Nietzsche to suffering, which the author sees just as compelling to the philosopher as the meaninglessness of reality. This might not be true of Nietzsche's entire reflection, given that, for instance, in BT suffering, precisely because of its essentially individual nature, is said to belong more on the side of illusion: the individual, as such, certainly suffers, but the individual is also not fully real. Therefore suffering could not be so essential a category as the meaninglessness of reality, which is unquestionably the ultimate "truth" unveiled by music, tragedy, and philosophy.

Chapter two is remarkable in dealing with the problem of *Bildung*, as it is set by Nietzsche in UM. Here the author is very effective in demonstrating the role played by the cultural collective dimension to the self-creation process of "great individuals." (Chapter six also examines this same role in the shaping of ordinary individuals, which actually amounts to crushing them into sacrificial slavery, i.e. their incomplete-ness and pure instrumentality as human beings [cf. BGE 258], for their own sake, as well as for the sake of great cultures themselves, so that the latter may shine and rule.) Here he

convincingly advocates that culture, in Nietzsche's eyes, indeed possesses a value *per se*, a stance reprised and developed in chapter three. Such value must come as completely deprived of utilitarianism—it is indeed a *confutation* of utilitarianism as a value (in the Nietzschean sense of the term). Such utility, as it happens, mostly comes in the form of gratification or pleasure, the *divertissement* which the "last man" finds himself completely ensnared in.

Chapter five is the climax of the focus of the book, the place where the reader is gently but steadily led from the beginning, and it lives up to the promises laid down in the introduction, at least as far as decadence is concerned. The author's thesis is that "decadence is a more specific kind of affliction characterized by a particular self-destructive pattern in the individual, bespeaking a proper order of the self" (p. 81). The following pages, concerning individual and cultural decadence, feature some of the most convincing analysis of the book. As for the former, the author argues that it basically consists in the outcome of an asymmetry in the individual issued from the tyranny he imposes on himself. As the author sees it, the matter here is not ruling, but "an *inappropriate*" sort of it (p. 85; author's italics). At the cultural level, decadence takes on the appearance of a lack of unity and an essential inability to strive for whole-ness. Here the author seems less certain about the meaning of this lack of unity, eventually resorting to define it as the analogue of the same asymmetry found in individuals. Here, too, a lack of unity means that one part or element has outgrown the others, to the extent that if a culture refuses to integrate one or more of them into a coherent whole, this leads to its, or theirs, tyrannical "extirpation or castration" (p. 93). A possible limit to the author's interpretation, here, may lay in its heavily relying on GM III and its discussion of the meaning of ascetic ideals, which could make it less adaptable to other Nietzschean texts. Indeed, even if the author's overall definition of decadence is generally acceptable, decadence comes as a multi-faceted reality both historically and theoretically: it is definitely the realm of ascetic ideals, for which the tyranny explanation fits perfectly, but also the taming and breeding of man (as it appears in TI and A), the music of Wagner, or Nietzsche himself as a philosopher—all realities for which this explanation fits

less. (Indeed, another question is here at stake: if philosophy is something issued from, or related to, the quintessentially decadent sacerdotal power, or something verging far more on the side of sickness than health, as Nietzsche often points out, then how can his philosophy sensibly claim to contribute to bringing about the most thorough liberation of mankind thus far?) In light of this, the author's solution to the problem of cultural decadence is not fully satisfactory, covering only partly, as it does, the wider semantic spectrum of its meaning.

The promises listed in the introduction, however, are only half-fulfilled, because the author, despite being generally convincing in his analysis of the decadence of culture(s), tells precious little about what makes a culture flourish. He incidentally mentions the Roman Empire in chapter three, without paying much attention to the fact that, in the eyes of the late Nietzsche of GM and A, the conflict between "Rome and Judaea" takes cosmic, near-apocalyptic proportions (and maybe, somehow, by putting the two opposite contenders side by side, is even capable to render an image of that wholeness, whose denial the author had so convincingly described as the very essence of decadence only a few pages earlier? As one suggestion). The author talks at length in chapter six of the sacrificial role played by millions of forgotten ordinary individuals in the making of great civilizations (by far the most recurring given example of which is, curiously, Italian Renaissance instead of ancient Greece), but we are eventually left thinking that, by knowing what decadence is, we can simply infer *via negationis* what greatness and flourishing consist of. This might just not be the case, given that, after all, what made the Italian Renaissance flourish might be quite different from what made ancient Greece so exceptional. Moreover, even great cultures may not be all great at the same level, and, given that Nietzsche actually writes down more than one list of ideal and anti-ideal *Kulturformen*, the question about what is necessarily implied by greatness becomes intertwined with the question about what makes some culture or individual greater (or more flourishing) than another.

These are, however, only remarks. The more significant criticisms of this book are essentially of two sorts. The first concerns its structure: The book, after a strong start, somehow loses its way after chapter five. A good third of it (notably chapters seven and eight) is devoted to a long analysis of Nietzsche's moral philosophy that bears not much affinity to the professed main subject of the enquiry. The second is methodological: if the conception of culture within the context of Nietzsche's productive life is quite vividly sketched, the historical-philosophical background in which Nietzsche lived and operated is almost entirely missing. For instance, we are left with no clue or information about whether the thriving Basel intellectual milieu—which comprised men who shared Nietzsche's sensibility, taking the ancient Greek example as the ground for general reflections on culture at large—exerted some influence on the young philologist-turned-philosopher, and his debut precisely focused, as the author rightly points out, on culture, not the "great individual." This is a fault that puzzles the reader also at a more general level, given that the author's main thesis—the recognition of the centrality of culture in, and for, Nietzsche's philosophy—is by no means a novel one. As a matter of fact, before Heidegger (whose work, published in 1961, was conceived between 1936 and 1946), Nietzsche was for decades considered less a philosopher than an exceptionally brilliant critic of culture who expressed himself in a literary form, as in the once pervasive interpretation by Dilthey. As for the subject of decadence in relation to culture, Thomas Mann wrote pages of unrivalled depth, in which each line betrays a profound meditation on Nietzsche, but the author does not engage with them (ironically, even the book's opening quote from Mann does not mention these reflections, but only praises Nietzsche as a philosophical hero). Such historical-theoretical background is unfortunately met in the book with deafening silence: this, together with the choice to largely omit (with only five exceptions) non-English speaking scholarship in the bibliography—a legitimate choice for sure, but left completely unsubstantiated of any methodological or theoretical argument in its favor—come as the book's major substantial shortcomings.