

Nietzsche's Tragic Realism

Paul E. Kirkland

Abstract: Whether in the service of aristocratic radicalism or radical democracy, Nietzsche's political thought has most often been associated with transformation rather than limitations. This paper argues that Nietzsche offers a realism that presents politics as driven by grand aspirations and bound by tragic limitations. Nietzsche draws on Thucydides as a source for a realism that is neither reductionist nor transformative, but rather looks to the grandest of human aspirations and the limits to those aspirations. The paper analyzes Nietzsche's treatment of the character of modern idealism, the source of conflicting values, the effects of liberalism, and the consequences of democratic modernity in order to flesh out his tragic realism. Rather than advocating the tyrannical decay he expects in the short term, Nietzsche points the way to a new politics shaped by grander goals and more moderate expectations than the idealistic leveling of modernity.

Nietzsche is rarely considered a source for political realism. Where his work has not been seen as apolitical, it has been distanced from any understanding of political limitations whether in the name of aristocratic radicalism or radical democracy. Because Nietzsche's thought has been associated with transformations of humanity whereas realism has been associated with the reduction of human motivation to calculations of advantage, his politics has appeared to bear no similarities with realist political thought. Political readings of Nietzsche's work have seen it as apolitical,¹ antipolitical,² concerned exclusively with the soul,³ serving democratic openness,⁴ fostering democratic contest,⁵ promoting transformative political movements,⁶

¹Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950).

²Peter Bergmann, *Nietzsche: The Last Anti-Political German* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

³Leslie Paul Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997); Lawrence J. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodernism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995).

⁵William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁶Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Tracy B. Strong, "Nietzsche's Political

directed toward radically inegalitarian political orders,⁷ cultivating a unifying earth-friendly politics,⁸ and implicated in the decadence of his time.⁹ This article argues that Nietzsche offers a new kind of realism, one that is neither reductionist nor transformative but rather attends to the grandest human aspirations and the limits of those aspirations. Nietzsche describes the necessary causes of political conflict and employs a tragic view of historical cycles to explain modernity's fatal ideals. Concurrently, he rejects pessimism as bound to otherworldly ideals and offers a realism that is beyond modern ideologies and the tyrannies he expects. For this sort of realism, Nietzsche believes Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Goethe set precedents.

This article presents a Nietzschean realism that rejects political universalism for quite different reasons than either postmodern efforts to provide for radical openness or the particular nationalisms that he explicitly rejected. The realism of Nietzsche's thought would deny support to political principles or orders that sought complete solutions or universal order. A politics of tragic realism would demand the acknowledgment of the limited character of all political orders and the conflicts that this certainty entails. Neither internal nor external contests could be resolved by resorting to broad principles. For Nietzsche, unhealthy political orders expect complete solutions or appeal to universal foundations. A healthier politics would be rooted in recognition of the limits of all political orders, the precarious nature of any political order, and the wellsprings of potentially destructive political ambitions.

Unlike the realism of theorists of international politics that use the Hobbesian goal of survival in a world of anarchy to explain competition for power,¹⁰ Nietzsche presents conflict as stemming in part from the inevitability of different values, and his realism involves an account of the tragedy of political orders themselves. Nietzsche's tragic realism explains his apparent admiration for tyrannical figures like Julius Caesar, Alcibiades, Napoleon, and even Cesare Borgia. He sees in them a realism that seizes opportunities in conditions of decay, but his praise for them is not a final claim of political preferences. Nietzsche describes these examples as tragic figures, and he indicates a higher possibility in recognizing tragedy, a genuine realism that

Aesthetics," in *Nietzsche's New Seas*, ed. Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy B. Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁷Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁸Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁹Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game: Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰See, e.g., John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 11. See also Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

manifests the capacity to love life as it is. Nietzsche's realism claims to embrace the totality of human life and all of its distinct aspirations without resorting to ideals imposed from outside of life. His realism about humanity extends to politics without reducing all motives to calculations of advantage. A full realism requires taking into account the complexity of human aspirations, including spiritual aspirations. On Nietzsche's account, it requires saying "yes" to all of these. It is most deeply at odds with any effort to design a model for society and then to attempt to direct human beings toward it, to denature man or create humanity to fit one's model.

Nietzsche's realism is connected to his tragic view in three ways. First, Nietzsche links the success of political figures and political orders to inexorable downfall. Second, he depicts political life and its deepest psychological roots as characterized by irreconcilable conflicts among incommensurable goods. Third, he presents the unavailability of ultimate political resolutions to these tensions. Unlike forms of realism that see the limiting of goals and the prioritizing of peace as reducing conflict, Nietzsche's realism does not expect that understanding the causes of conflict can succeed in resolving conflict. Nietzsche's realism accepts the reality of political aspirations; it does not seek to eliminate them. He goes so far as to express admiration for figures of great political ambitions because of the human possibilities they represent, not the effects they bring. His embrace of such figures is bound to his vision that those ambitions bring ultimate collapse, not a final reordering. In this regard, Nietzsche's politics stands in sharp contrast with the efforts that distinguish modern political thought. Nietzsche's presentation of realism does not seek to eliminate overweening ambitions or resolve fundamental conflicts, but it does attempt to divorce political life from eschatological hopes. He thus rejects modern optimism and its hopes for infinite progress, perpetual peace, or a resting point of human history. This perspective can be understood as postmodern in that Nietzsche rejects what he sees to be the inheritance of otherworldliness in modernity and its idealism. Yet, Nietzsche's antimodernism looks to life as it is to combat the eschatological universalism of modern thought rather than seeking to transform humanity in accordance with willful products at odds with life.

Realism and Tragedy

When Nietzsche describes what is life affirming, he offers both political realism and the tragic poet as examples. The political realist is an example of one who has "become free" and capable of embracing life just as the tragic poet exemplifies the life-affirming spirit able to say "Yes to life even [with] its strangest and hardest problems" (TI, Skirmishes 49; TI, Ancients 5).¹¹ Nietzsche

¹¹Friedrich Nietzsche. *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 30 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967). I have followed the

associates both with his mature view of Dionysus and his measure for life-affirming views, eternal return (TI, Skirmishes 49; EH, BT 2). When Nietzsche describes the hope he has for the future, he promises a “tragic age” in which a “party of life” will emerge (EH, BT 4). Even as his tragic view leaves no room for a final state of success or full reconciliation, Nietzsche claims that it need not lead to pessimism or resignation (BT, Attempt 6). A tragic view that remains free from resignation would affirm life and action without expecting action to produce complete solutions. Indeed, it would affirm life and action precisely because it did not expect complete solutions on a political plane. One might describe such action as grounded in a realism that embraces action in the face of the limits of life’s possibilities rather than fleeing to otherworldly ideals or idealistic expectations for the world. Examining such a tragic view and the political realism connected with it will reveal Nietzsche’s treatment of politics beyond idealism and pessimism.

By taking the challenge to metaphysics as primary and separable from Nietzsche’s own political claims, some postmodern readers of Nietzsche have found in Nietzsche’s antipathy to Platonism a politics of democratic openness.¹² Yet, Nietzsche is explicit in his presentation of the vision he

translations of Walter Kaufmann for citations: *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage, 1966), *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage, 1967), *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Vintage, 1954), which contains *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*. I have used the following abbreviations for citations to Nietzsche’s works. All citations refer to aphorism or section number: BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*; BT = *The Birth of Tragedy*; EH = *Ecce Homo*; GM = *On the Genealogy of Morals*; HH = *Human, All Too Human*; TI = *Twilight of the Idols*; TSZ = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; UD = “Uses and Disadvantages.”

¹²Mark Warren argues that such a separation of Nietzsche’s politics from his philosophy is justified because Nietzsche fails to elaborate the political possibilities that stem from his philosophy (Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988], 208, 246). Warren claims that the will to power requires the political goal of “maintaining conditions under which humans fully develop their powers as agents,” which he argues is best achieved in a pluralist egalitarian society (ibid., 226, 247). Jacques Derrida describes Nietzschean affirmation as “play” that disrupts “presence” and opens the way beyond metaphysics to infinite openness of interpretation. (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 292). For Derrida, the political analogue of infinite openness of interpretation is a democratic politics that is perpetually incomplete and involves ever expanding openness to the others it excludes (Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 305–6). Derrida describes Nietzsche’s antidemocratic position as an assault on the “hyperbole of democracy” that points toward the “incalculable equality” of “incommensurable subjects” and the perpetual openness of “friends of the perhaps” that may condition a politics of friendship (39, 43). Thus, Derrida takes Nietzsche’s critique

embraces as the alternative to Platonist idealism. He does not leave the task of sorting out the political implications of his antimetaphysical stance to others. He offers realism as the antidote to Platonist idealism: "My recreation, my preference, my cure form all Platonism has always been Thucydides. Thucydides and Machiavelli's *Principe* are most clearly related to me" (TI, Ancients 2). In contrast to ideal regimes, Nietzsche prefers Thucydides' and Machiavelli's accounts of "what is done" rather than "what should be done."¹³ He praises those authors who share with him an "unconditional will not to gull oneself and see reason in *reality*—not in 'reason,' still less in 'morality'" (TI, Ancients 2). Nietzsche looks to Thucydides among the ancients as an author who presents the reasons that political men have given for their actions. For Nietzsche, Thucydides' realism involves presenting the complex motives of political actors along with the actions and motivations these reasons justify.

Thucydides presents the reasons that political men have given for their actions, but on Nietzsche's account, he avoids deluding himself about the reason in their reasons and moral claims. According to Nietzsche, not only does Thucydides avoid presenting reality as conforming to a rational or moral order, he sees purported reasons as the evidence of a deeper reality of politics, human action, and motivation. He thus advises that when reading Thucydides, "One must follow him line by line and read no less clearly between the lines; there are few thinkers who say so much between the lines" (TI, Ancients 2). Because Thucydides depicts actions and indicates motives—rather than making arguments—between the lines, he reveals the reality of political life.

Thucydides' realism is deeper than the rationalistic claims for raw power that he depicts in the Melian dialogue, often taken as a great example of political realism. In response to the Melian appeal to divine justice, the Athenians

of democratic reductionism, not as a recipe for hierarchy, but as a spur to an egalitarian politics informed by awareness that its equality can never be complete, a perpetual quest for recognition among unknown others. William Connolly uses Nietzsche as a source for developing his postmodern agonistic democracy. Connolly draws on Nietzsche's "skeptical contestation of transcendental and teleological philosophies, indebted to his genealogies, touched by his reverence for life and the earth" while eschewing the politics of domination and hierarchy in order to "fold Nietzschean agonism into the fabric of ordinary life" (Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 185, 187). Drawing on Nietzsche while contesting his choice of political metaphors, Connolly argues that "agonistic democracy" serves the "pathos of distance" and "strife," lauded by Nietzsche, for a late-modern interdependent age (Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 193). For another example of an argument for an agonistic democracy supported by Nietzsche's thought, see Lawrence Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).

¹³Machiavelli, *Prince*, chap. 15.

justify their actions with an alternative theology. They describe themselves as, like the gods, “under an innate compulsion to rule wherever empowered.”¹⁴ Comparing themselves with the gods, their hubris emerges amid the apparent argument for calculated advantage.¹⁵ As they deny the justice of the gods, they attempt to justify their actions by claiming they are godlike. They, nonetheless, retain a sense of justice that allows them to consider their empire as something they deserve. Thucydides reveals the contradictions in Athenian claims and hubris in what might be considered the pinnacle of a tragedy. As their pride directs them to Alcibiades’ Sicilian plans, their sense of justice and piety directs them against Alcibiades’ person. They have acceded to his plans, but have not been fully persuaded to ignore those qualms that might suggest restraint. They are unwilling to accept those conditions necessary to fulfill the sorts of ambitions that drive them. Launching their attack on Sicily and continuing it without Alcibiades’ command exhibit the tragic conflict beneath the surface of Athens’s decisions. Thucydides highlights the role of this conflict in Athens’s downfall.

In his assessment of Pericles, Thucydides claims that the Athenians met disaster because they did not follow Pericles’ advice to restrain themselves from expanding their empire during the war. However, he also suggests that under the proper command, the Sicilian expedition could have succeeded.¹⁶ Thucydides pairs the two paths to success without suggesting that either is possible. He shows that abandoning restraint requires abandoning it altogether. Even Alcibiades cannot succeed in persuading Athens of this course. Thucydides’ realism displays the contradictions in this aim as tragic. The tragedy is not merely one of hubris, but of an inevitable tension. The ruthless realism that would abandon all scruples for the sake of success, exemplified by Alcibiades, is itself too optimistic, in that it hopes to purify ambition of scruples (thus of all sense of desert). Even as Thucydides announces the twin possibilities that would be necessary for Athens’s success—either Periclean or Alcibiadean—he shows the inevitability of Athenian collapse under its internal contradiction. Because both are parts of Athens, because their ambition cannot be separated from their sense of desert, their decay appears inevitable. Thucydides depicts the Peloponnesian War as a tragedy.

The tragic spirit of political realism stands as Nietzsche’s alternative to both optimism and pessimism. It is an antidote to Platonism and a cure for the idealism of modern optimism. As Thucydides presents human motives and political action with more subtlety than the reductionist Athenian envoys, he avoids the idealism Nietzsche finds in the philosophers’ response to decay. Nietzsche describes the philosophers as “decadents of Greek

¹⁴Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 5.105.

¹⁵See Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 105–6, on the Athenians’ hubris and their revised theology.

¹⁶Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.

culture" (TI, Ancients 3). They provide an idealizing response to a reality in decay. Connecting idealism to decay, Nietzsche finds idealism to be a response to an unhealthy reality: "The Socratic virtues were preached because the Greeks had lost them" (TI, Ancients 3). Plato's Socrates acknowledges that he responds to an Athens that has fallen away from its prime of health and virtue.¹⁷ For Nietzsche, this forges a connection between philosophy and decay. Philosophy emerges to give a rational account just when virtues no longer identify the character of a people. Such idealism, Nietzsche claims, has swindled centuries of students into an idealized imagination of the Greeks and Greek culture. As Nietzsche warns in his treatment of "monumental history," excessive regard for a heroic past falsifies the possibilities of the present (UD 2). Thucydides is for Nietzsche an aid in combating both unreal hopes and pessimistic despair. Nietzsche's description of Thucydides' distinction calls attention to the virtue required for such realism: "In the end, it is courage in the face of reality that distinguishes a man like Thucydides from Plato: Plato is a coward before reality, consequently he flees into the ideal; Thucydides has control of himself, consequently he also maintains control of things" (TI, Ancients 2). Thucydides' courage allows him to present the tragedy of a Greek world reaching the onset of its decline. What Nietzsche praises in Thucydides as political realism requires not just greater honesty about hard truths, but the courage to avoid placing one's hopes beyond the cycles of human reality or resigning in inactive despair.

With his preference for Thucydides' realism, Nietzsche sets the stage for us to consider how tragedy might serve a healthier politics. Tragedy plays a political role in Tracy Strong's account by establishing authority and compelling an audience to recognize in themselves an interpretation that is transfiguring.¹⁸ In this mode, Nietzsche aims to address the modern problem that "nothing stands authoritatively for us."¹⁹ Strong's attention to the nihilism that results from a lack of authority entails viewing Nietzsche's politics as an effort to transfigure human beings, radically remaking what they are.²⁰ It gives too little attention to the way in which the tragic spirit underlying aesthetic unity also demands a confrontation with the limits of what is possible for human beings and political orders. In contrast to Strong's claim that the central issue is authority, Thomas Heilke argues that Nietzsche's view of the central political question is "what kind of human being is required for the community he desires."²¹ Heilke presents Nietzsche's view of tragedy as that which cultivates human beings for a healthy community established

¹⁷See Plato, *Apology*, 30e.

¹⁸Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Aesthetics," 164.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 171.

²⁰Strong, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*.

²¹Heilke, *Nietzsche's Tragic Regime: Culture, Aesthetics and Political Education* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 27.

on non-enlightenment principles. It does so by forming an aesthetic unity of community from the primal unity of life, forming horizons for most human beings, fostering healthy (rather than diseased) instincts in that community. Rather than suggesting a simply prediscursive or purely linguistic unity, Heilke defines Nietzsche's political goals as the aesthetic cultivation of a "tragic regime" that shapes "images, moods, and visions."²² In contrast to what he calls "Romantic pessimism" (associated with Schopenhauer), Heilke argues that this regime can be grounded in "Dionysian pessimism," which reflects a fundamental joy drawn from the substratum of life beyond rationalist claims, and manifest in music, art generally, and especially tragedy.

Fostering a tragic regime can also be connected to a political realism because it must confront the limits of achievement. As Heilke acknowledges, Nietzsche's politics "would neither result in a utopian golden age (which Nietzsche abhorred) nor last forever."²³ It cannot establish principles that escape the flux and turmoil of life. A healthy vision of politics must come to terms with its own limitations. A fully tragic vision includes the aspirations of the grandest political examples, the conflict that cannot be resolved, and the inevitable decay of even the healthiest orders. Nietzsche's political realism involves his rejection of bourgeois culture and its attendant liberal institutions as well as Romantic culture and the nationalism it spawns in favor of a politics that serves a tragic culture. Heilke has demonstrated Nietzsche's cultural views to have a political meaning in his presentation of Nietzsche's effort to foster a tragic regime.²⁴ While Nietzsche does not specify the institutions of such a political order, he does attend to the cultural requirements of such an order. He articulates the character of a new nobility and offers a political education that would support a tragic culture. As he envisions a future "party of life" in "a tragic age," his hopes for the renewal of a tragic culture assume a distinctively political color.

Modern Idealism

Realism about political tragedy and support for a tragic culture are both absent from the distinctively modern politics, which for Nietzsche reaches its full manifestation in the French Revolution. The French Revolution exemplifies for Nietzsche the idealism that rejects the reality of nature and human nature. Declaring his hatred for "Rousseau in the French Revolution" and the "doctrine of equality," Nietzsche praises a "return to nature" at odds with the primitive equality Rousseau offers (TI, Skirmishes 48). Napoleon thus marks a "return to nature" understood as an "ascent—up into the high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness where great tasks are something one plays with"

²²Ibid., 24, 51, 125, 183.

²³Ibid., 185.

²⁴Ibid.

(TI, Skirmishes 48). The reality of a return to nature, of throwing off conventional distinctions, is not the egalitarian beginnings of the French Revolution, but rather Napoleon's dictatorship, which seizes power under such conditions.²⁵ The emergence of such a singular figure is the natural and realistic outcome of democratic revolution. Only idealistic falsifiers, Nietzsche argues, would see it otherwise. For Nietzsche, Rousseau represents such a figure, the "first modern man, idealist and rabble in one person" (TI, Skirmishes 48). Nietzsche's realism stands at odds with modern egalitarian idealism, rejecting its view of nature as primitive and common.

Nietzsche's view of an ascending measure provided by nature stands at odds with the portrait of humanity Rousseau provides in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, which presents a condition of equality by portraying humanity with nothing more than the potential for anything that is recognizably human.²⁶ Rousseau recognized that one cannot return to such a condition of natural equality, and he presents the introduction of inequality as coeval with the emergence of all that is distinct to humanity. The revolutionary spirit derives from Rousseau's account of the need to denature man in order to form a new and political equality.²⁷ The spirit of an age that is "idealistic, unreal, and revolutionary" rejects nature and attempts to remake the world in this image. For Nietzsche, all egalitarianism is a product of such unreality, of a standpoint contrary to life. It would seek to eliminate not only artificial distinctions, but also elements of the nature of humanity. Opposing such revolutionary egalitarianism, Nietzsche identifies idealism in the modern world with this sort of ideological spirit of revolution attached to doctrines of equality. The representative modern man is both "idealist and rabble" as modern idealism aims to combat limits set by nature, yet does so in the service of egalitarian leveling. To this view of modern politics, Nietzsche attributes both idealism and reductionism. Nietzsche's view of realism offers a critique of both. Neither reductionism nor efforts to denature humanity offer any realism about human beings and politics.

Amid the unrealistic politics of modern revolutionary movements, Nietzsche finds a model for a realist's view of life and the political twists and turns of his day. Nietzsche offers Goethe as a model for the type of realism he endorses: "In the middle of an age with an unreal outlook,

²⁵Paul Glenn argues that Napoleon exemplifies Nietzsche's higher man, demonstrating that political action is an activity proper to the higher man for Nietzsche ("Nietzsche's Napoleon: The Higher Man as Political Actor," *The Review of Politics* 63 [2001]: 129–58). In so doing, he properly rejects those views that would see Nietzsche as nonpolitical such as Kaufmann's apolitical reading, Bergmann's antipolitical one, Thiele's claims that he is concerned only with the regime in the soul, or claims like Nehamas's that see the arts to the exclusion of politics as the model for higher human lives.

²⁶Rousseau, *Discourse On the Origin of Inequality*, pt. 1.

²⁷Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 40.

Goethe was a convinced realist: he said Yes to everything that was related to him in this respect" (TI, Skirmishes 49). Lauding Goethe's realism, Nietzsche contrasts him with his age and thus with Kant and the Rousseauian spirit of the French Revolution. He sees a kindred spirit of noble realism in Goethe because he shares a view of nature as ascent. Like Napoleon, Goethe is, for Nietzsche, an example of a "return to nature," understood as "an ascent to the naturalness of the Renaissance" (TI, Skirmishes 49). Thus, Nietzsche's estimation of Goethe's realism springs in part from Goethe's recognition of Napoleon as "that *ens realissimum*" (TI, Skirmishes 49). As Nietzsche describes it, "Goethe conceived a human being who would be strong, highly educated, skillful in all bodily matters, self-controlled, reverent toward himself, and who might dare to afford the whole range and wealth of being natural, being strong enough for such freedom" (TI, Skirmishes 49). This view finds nature in action "beyond what is forbidden" yet also under "self-control." The self-discipline required for taking great actions and seizing opportunities characterizes this natural man, not some return to primitive equality.

Goethe provides Nietzsche a model that resists idealizing temptations and embraces nature and human life. Nietzsche sees in Goethe not a revolutionary narrowing, but rather a desire for "totality" pursued by fighting "the mutual extraneousness of reason, senses, feeling, and will" (TI, Skirmishes 49). To become whole, to access the whole of what is human, a multifaceted approach to life is needed. Nietzsche finds this approach to life embodied in Goethe, a latter day representative of the spirit of the Renaissance. Like Leonardo da Vinci, whom Nietzsche praises along with Alcibiades and Caesar, Goethe exemplifies "a real mastery and subtlety in waging war against oneself, in other words, self-control, self-outwitting" (BGE 200). Through such a pursuit, Nietzsche claims, Goethe "disciplined himself to wholeness, he *created* himself" (TI, Skirmishes 49), not by abandoning nature, not by sheer will to make human goals of undisciplined inclinations, but by a "return to nature." Rather than an opposition between self-creation and nature, Nietzsche praises Goethe for a wholeness that embraces life as it is and pursues manifold paths to comprehending human life. His artistry and his realism go together in affirming complexity rather than seeking to impose ideological simplification, leveling, and escape. When Nietzsche praises self-creation in Goethe, he rejects ideological and transformational politics in favor of a realism that has political and artistic manifestations. For Tracy Strong, Nietzsche's political project involves changing "the very stuff of humanity," overcoming all that is human, all too human, and "making a change in the nature of man."²⁸ Yet, Nietzsche rejects politics that aim to make human beings to fit their ideals in favor of those suited to human beings. Strong's influential view of Nietzsche's politics ignores his call for realism and his challenge to modern revolutionary politics,

²⁸Strong, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, 293.

which object not only to egalitarian goals, but also to hopes to change humanity and abandon life as measure.²⁹ Nietzsche describes all such efforts to remake humanity as products of an unreal outlook, a denial of life, the vengeful incapacity to say "Yes" to what is. Self-creation is not for Nietzsche some arbitrary project of human beings unhinged from nature's guidance; it is the highest product of a disciplined nature.

The project of self-creation is not that of willfully imposing ideals. Rather, a healthy creation of a self or a political order draws from the stuff of humanity and the genuine drives of life. Projects of creation are not for Nietzsche about imposing ideals, which take the standard from outside of life. The Dionysian spirit to which Nietzsche appeals would take life in all of its myriad turmoil as the fount from which any creation is possible. Human life is not something that can be simply formed into whatever we wish. Instead, it is a complex set of forces that can be well crafted by individuals who make a whole from what cannot be eliminated. Revolutionary idealism is for Nietzsche a denial of life akin to otherworldly religion because it springs from an impulse that seeks to escape the wellspring of life and subordinate it to routinized and rationalized modes that deny their own basis. Creating oneself in Nietzsche's view involves cultivating the myriad drives natural to life, drawing on the stuff of humanity that cannot simply be made anew, and giving form to those drives. By giving form to the drives and springs of living beings, one might create order while embracing life, or in Nietzsche's early language, bring Apollonian order to Dionysian frenzy without the effort to impose an order that denies the primordial impulses of life. Giving such form and masks to "the indestructibly powerful and pleasurable" drives of life is what Nietzsche ascribes to the origins of Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT 7). With such a "return to the naturalness of the Renaissance," Nietzsche credits Goethe and his ability to create himself by disciplining himself to wholeness (TI, Skirmishes 49).

In his pursuit of totality through myriad perspectives, Goethe represents for Nietzsche "a convinced realist," and in this Nietzsche attributes to him an achievement of the highest order. Goethe stands as an example of the Yes-saying, life-affirming model in contrast with the life-denying revolutionary spirit. Nietzsche's portrait of Goethe allows us to see how he advances a realism that, while at odds with revolutionary idealism, avoids reductionism. This realism rejects ideological optimism while embracing the complexity of human aspirations rather than reducing all motives to calculations of advantage. It is most deeply at odds with any effort to construct a model for society and then to attempt to direct human beings toward it, to denature man or create humanity to fit one's model. This understanding of nature, realism,

²⁹Associating this politics of transfiguration with Nietzsche's teaching of eternal return, Strong transforms the doctrine that demands embracing life as it is into its opposite (*Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, 287–92). Consider TSZ 3.13.

and what it means to “create oneself” stands opposed to the spirit of the French Revolution and in contrast to the ideological totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. Nietzsche praises Goethe’s recognition of the futility of efforts to make humanity into something it is not. He admires Goethe’s awareness that efforts to transform the stuff of humanity will have consequences vastly different from those hoped for by unreal and idealistic revolutionaries. Nietzsche’s opposition to the French Revolution, and to the revolutionary spirit more generally, challenges not only its radical egalitarianism but also its idealism, its opposition to the reality of life. Because grandiose schemes for reconstructing social orders and human nature took an egalitarian form at the time, Nietzsche’s most conspicuous critiques of unreal idealism are also critiques of revolutionary egalitarianism. However, Nietzsche’s critique would leave equal reservation about any mass political movements or ideological schemes to construct human beings according to willful models.

The Tragedy of Freedom

Nietzsche’s presentation of modernity as tragic is a particular case of a general condition of human orders. For Nietzsche, all values that form peoples and orders are tragic because of the very source of those values. In Zarathustra’s account of man as the esteemer (*der Schätzende*), he explains: “Praiseworthy is whatever seems difficult to a people” (TSZ I.15). This gives all orders and all sets of values a tragic structure insofar as success removes difficulty and the source for the strength gained from those values. For this reason, Nietzsche sees the value of each particular set of values as temporary and bound to its own demise. Modern liberalism presents an acute case of this phenomenon, and Nietzsche turns from Zarathustra’s general articulation to address the particular case of modern valuing of freedom.

The explicit political analysis Nietzsche offers in *Twilight of the Idols* serves the contest with modernity and reveals the self-undermining character of its core values. Nietzsche understands the self-undermining of modern values to prepare the way for his own affirmative view of tragic realism. Nietzsche most clearly demonstrates this tragic structure in his treatment of the political value of freedom. The generally tragic structure of all valuing—and the structure of modern valuing—manifests itself with great force in the case of the tragic structure of liberal politics. He writes of the destructive effect of liberal politics: “Liberalism: in other words, herd-animalization” (TI Skirmishes 38), claiming that it has effects exactly the opposite of its intention to promote freedom. He explains how liberalism is self-undermining by contrasting it with his “conception of freedom,” derived from the source of value in difficulty: “The value of a thing sometimes does not lie in what one attains by it, but in what one pays for it—what it costs us” (TI, Skirmishes 38). As overcoming difficulty leads to valuing, great risks and sacrifice are necessary

to attain any worthy thing. Because human beings attribute value only to what has been difficult to attain and because the effort is a process for attaining strength and character, nothing easy will be valuable to human beings.

With this general principle established, Nietzsche uses liberalism as an example. He states bluntly that "Liberal institutions cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained" (TI, Skirmishes 38). Success leads them to fail to be what they aspire to be. The institutionalization of freedom is for Nietzsche the greatest threat to freedom because it eliminates obstacles that are the source of strength. Liberalism provides Nietzsche an especially choice example of this phenomenon because it aims to remove obstacles and institutionalize freedom. It creates the ease that saps all strength. While the struggle for freedom may be a source of genuine strength, it is institutionalization—success—that leaves liberalism to undermine its own goal:

There are no worse and no more thorough injurers of freedom than liberal institutions. Their effects are known well enough: they undermine the will to power; they level mountain and valley, and call that morality; they make men small, cowardly, and hedonistic—every time it is the herd animal that triumphs with them. (TI, Skirmishes 38)

The herd animal triumphs under liberal institutions because there are no difficult goals, there are only small and petty pleasures. Where nothing demands risk, human beings will cease to be capable of risk. Cowardice is the destruction of freedom as it is willing to abandon everything to merely living. Freedom, as it is understood and practiced by liberalism, is antithetical to real freedom because it would slacken all that could make man whole. "The reverse is what happens: the claim for independence, for free development, for *laissez aller* is pressed most hotly by the very people for whom no reins would be too strict" (TI, Skirmishes 41). In "politics" as "in art," discipline is necessary for any development. Any meaningful freedom would require self-control brought about by surmounting difficulties. For this reason, "These same institutions produce quite different effects while they are still being fought for; then they really promote freedom in a powerful way" (TI, Skirmishes 38). To fight for freedom requires the sacrifice of other goals, petty goals, and mere life, to that of freedom. In such a fight, one acquires freedom because the strength and risk it entails demand surmounting one's own base desires and freedom for the fear that attaches one to mere life. The fight for freedom requires the discipline to subordinate other drives to the spirit of freedom, yet success and institutionalization of that freedom establish the greatest injury to freedom.³⁰ Nietzsche clearly presents liberalism as a tragedy. It struggles for something the very attainment of which is its own undermining.

³⁰Frederick Appel shows that Nietzsche views liberal democracy as conditioning the higher human beings and potential tyrants that would subvert its principles (*Nietzsche Contra Democracy* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999], 130).

In his account of the tragic structure of liberalism's view of freedom, Nietzsche offers a counter-definition of human freedom. Since the fight for freedom, rather than the attainment of free institutions, is the source of freedom, Nietzsche claims that closer examination reveals that it is "war that produces these effects" (TI, Skirmishes 38). Because freedom requires the priority of the drive to victory over that of pleasure, "war educates for freedom" (TI, Skirmishes 38). On Nietzsche's account, "the free man is a warrior" (TI, Skirmishes 38), who is able to take responsibility for himself and to risk himself for goals beyond his preservation, comfort, and equality. Resistance is a necessary condition for developing freedom because "one must need to be strong—otherwise one will never become strong" (TI, Skirmishes 38).

Given his account of freedom, Nietzsche offers a very illiberal portrait of the free man: "The highest type of free man should be sought where the highest freedom is constantly overcome: five steps from tyranny, close to the threshold of the danger of servitude" (TI, Skirmishes 38). Julius Caesar provides Nietzsche with the model for the "most beautiful type" of such freedom won through "the maximum of authority and discipline against themselves" (TI, Skirmishes 38). As he describes the collapse of liberal institutions under their own weaknesses, Nietzsche appears to proffer the alternative of imperial commanders such as Julius Caesar and Napoleon, grand figures who subvert decayed republican orders. Paul Glenn claims that Nietzsche, in arguing that politics is an activity proper to the higher man exemplified by Napoleon, rejects all instrumental views of politics in favor of an aesthetic view of politics.³¹ As Nietzsche claims both that "the great human being is a finale" (TI, Skirmishes 44) and argues that "every enhancement of the type 'man' has so far been the work of an aristocratic society" (BGE 257), the claim that he views political action apart from its goals does not seem warranted.³² As the goals and effects continue to shape Nietzsche's evaluation of grand political figures, he does not shrink from describing such figures as tyrants as he offers them as the alternative to degrading egalitarian politics. It appears that Nietzsche expects tyranny as the overthrow and consummation of modern democratic orders. Amid the

³¹ Glenn suggests that instrumental views have characterized all of Western political thought even as the goals change drastically. By contrast, he claims, Nietzsche believes "the value of a political action, just as with art, is rooted in the act itself" ("Nietzsche's Napoleon" 146), thus giving way to an "aesthetic" view of politics. By contrast, Bruce Detwiler demonstrates the higher human type to be the goal of Nietzsche's politics, an instrumental view that fits more neatly into the history of Western political philosophy (Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, 191).

³² Neither would Nietzsche's concern with those political orders under which the highest human possibilities come to be support a view that separates the politics of the soul from external politics, as Thiele attempts (*Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul*, 222).

optimistic late nineteenth century, he anticipates a tyrannical politics to follow from the democratization of Europe.

Tyrannical Denouement

Rather than leaving us with an eschatological expectation of “the last man” that will forever prevent all future developments, Nietzsche describes “Europe’s democratic movement” as leading to “the leveling and mediocratization of man—to a useful, industrious, handy, multipurpose herd animal,” producing “a type that is prepared for slavery” (BGE 242). Small-souled modern men, prepared for slavery, are not “last men,”³³ but suitable subjects for tyrants. “I meant to say: the democratization of Europe is at the same time an involuntary arrangement for the cultivation of tyrants—taking that word in every sense, including the most spiritual” (BGE 242). The leveling of human beings deprives them of the spirit of freedom, forming conditions exposing them to the ambitious. Politics conditions possibilities rather than creating radically new creatures. Herd-like men are likely to accept the domination of those who seek tyrannical rule: “Great men are necessary, the age in which they appear is accidental; that they almost always become masters of their age is only because they are stronger, because they are older, because for a longer time much was gathered for them” (TI, Skirmishes 44). Napoleon provides Nietzsche an example of a great figure who emerges despite the leveling character of his age.

In recounting the emergence of such rare few, Nietzsche describes the mixture of civilizations and their roots to have a dual effect likely to produce tyranny. Multiplicity and tension will weaken most people just as it fosters the greatest strength in a very few. While “human beings of late cultures and refracted lights will on the average be weaker human beings: their most profound desire is that the war they *are* should come to an end” (BGE 200). Those who respond well to this war will forge the greatest strength:

But when the opposition and war in such a nature have the effect of one more charm and incentive to life—and if, moreover, in addition to his powerful and irreconcilable drives, a real mastery and subtlety in waging war against oneself, in other words, self-control, self-outwitting, has been inherited or cultivated, too—then those magical, incomprehensible, and unfathomable ones arise, those enigmatic men predestined for victory and seduction, whose most beautiful expression is found in Alcibiades and Julius Caesar. (BGE 200)

Democratic leveling and the complexity they develop enervate most while strengthening rare souls; such conditions prepare both masses and potential

³³TSZ, prologue, 5. This famous formulation is a vestige of Zarathustra’s Persian eschatology.

rulers for conditions of tyranny. There can be little doubt that Nietzsche sees his time to be such a time of democratic “degeneration of man,” overburdened by awareness of many cultural sources, a time prepared for the rule of imperial tyrants.

In conjunction with his account of the cultivation of tyrants and subjects of tyranny, Nietzsche describes reasons for a new European empire. He predicts that Europe will need to become one in order to defend itself and wants to become one in order to overcome the “insanity of nationality” (BGE 256). Describing the likely need for a Europe unified for the sake of its own survival, Nietzsche writes, “I do not say this because I want it to happen: the opposite would be rather more after my heart—I mean such an increase in the menace of Russia that Europe would have to resolve to becoming menacing, too, namely, to acquire one will by means of a new caste that would rule Europe” (BGE 208). He predicts that European nation-states will not be strong enough to resist the menace of Russia; they will *need* a unified will in order to face the conditions of a coming age. With these predictions, Nietzsche describes what he sees as the likely result of democratization and decay. Sanguine at the time about social progress and the balance of power among nation-states, Nietzsche anticipates the coming of tyranny and empire. He famously offers his forecast for the twentieth century: “The time for petty politics is over: the very next century will bring the fight for the dominion of the earth—the *compulsion* to large-scale politics” (BGE 208). The twentieth century, he predicts, will be an age of great wars, world wars, including a great conflict with Russia. As he also predicts the collapse of democratizing Europe into tyranny, he makes clear his expectation that imperial tyranny is the future of European politics. Looking to the twentieth century, Nietzsche expects a “new warlike age” (BGE 209) in which men face new resistance and thereby gain strength and risk, “the skepticism of audacious manliness” (BGE 209), the freedom that has been threatened by liberal institutions and democratic politics.

Along with the need for unity to survive the wars of the coming age, Nietzsche writes that “Europe wants to become one” (BGE 256), for only European unity will give rise to figures beyond “the insanity of nationality” (BGE 256). The achievements of men like Goethe and Napoleon are European, not national, phenomena. He summarizes this drive in Goethe’s realist assessment of Napoleon: “At long last, we ought to understand deeply enough Napoleon’s surprise when he came to see Goethe: it shows what people have associated with the ‘German spirit’ for centuries. “*Voilà un homme!*”—that meant: ‘But this is a man! And I had merely expected a German’” (BGE 209). The great men that may emerge in the future, Nietzsche expects, will not be national figures; both political and literary geniuses will be the product of a unified European civilization.

One might conclude at this point that Nietzsche’s politics favor tyranny and empire. His praise for the likes of Napoleon, Caesar, and Alcibiades and his anticipation of a European empire engaged in great wars provide a clear

picture of the politics he expects soon to emerge. Daniel Conway offers an account of Nietzsche's designs for European empire, modeled on the Roman Empire and reversing Bismarck's victory in order that "culture might once again thrive at the expense of the state" and organized around the goal of producing great human beings.³⁴ Yet, Nietzsche's effort to give a realist's account of politics does not praise, but only predicts, the course of things he describes, predictions much more accurate than the expectations of many of his contemporaries. It should be noted that Nietzsche predicts the likelihood of such "a terrible will that casts its goals millennia hence" ruling Europe, claiming it will be necessary rather than presenting it as desirable. Short-term possibilities include no desirable state of affairs for Nietzsche; his affirmative task may need to wait a century and spur the emergence from twentieth-century tyrannies.

As Nietzsche opposes the revolutionary spirit and takes a realist's view of the likely unintended consequences of ideological hopes, it is an obvious understatement that he is also no conservative. He addresses conservatives with a whisper: "But no one is free to be a crab. Nothing avails: one must go forward—step by step further into decadence" (TI, Skirmishes 43). He does not have high hopes for the immediate future, but denies that any course can avoid the progress of decay. With this, Nietzsche's praise for Napoleonic dictators and his expectations of ensuing tyranny can be seen in a new light. Nietzsche may see a form of human greatness in such figures, in their capacity to master situations presented to them, but this does not lead to the conclusion that Nietzsche simply endorses tyrannical subversion of free politics. Rather, for him, the inevitability of such *decay* is part of his realist politics. His praise for those like Napoleon, Caesar, and Alcibiades may include admiration of their realistic recognition of decay and their capacities to take advantage of the situation, but all of them are for Nietzsche, ultimately, tragic figures. Acknowledging that Napoleon may be a tragic figure, Glenn continues to point to him to illustrate that Nietzsche holds political activity as among the highest activities for human beings.³⁵ Glenn's acknowledgment of the tragic character of the grand political figure needs further exploration than is found in attributing it to

³⁴Daniel Conway, "Ecce Caesar: Nietzsche's Imperial Ambitions," in *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy*, ed. Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 176–77. For Conway, Nietzsche's imperial plans are a part of Nietzsche's strategy to ensure for himself a role in shaping future European culture beyond the decadence in which he and his "anachronistic and nostalgic" hopes are implicated ("Nietzsche's Imperial Ambitions," 190; *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game*, 163).

³⁵Glenn suggests, "The failure of the higher man is thus tragic because it deprives us of something magnificent, but it is also expected" ("Nietzsche's Napoleon," 157). Of course, if his failure is tragic, it should also be an expected and necessary consequence of his very height.

Nietzsche's rejection of dichotomies.³⁶ If Napoleon is a tragic figure, it may not be incidental that he ends up serving a corrupting, democratizing cause, but rather a case of a general decadence that produces him. Indicating decadence as the conditions for figures such as Caesar and Napoleon, Nietzsche suggests a higher human possibility in recognizing the reality and necessity of such political tragedies. Regarding politics as tragic does not require a nonpolitical or antipolitical reading of Nietzsche, but neither does a political reading require a view of politics as an activity for exhibiting the highest human qualities. Bruce Detwiler sees that Nietzsche's politics are ultimately subordinated to and designed to serve cultural attainment.³⁷ Others show that political action is subordinate to philosophy, which in turn exemplifies the highest sort of political action.³⁸ Higher than the tragic hero stand those able to recognize tragedy (BGE 30), those capable of the fullest realism about human life.

Nietzsche's account of modernity's movement toward tyranny is finally the description of a tragedy. Modern political hopes will be self-defeating, undone by their own hubris, weakened by their own success. Nietzsche does not long for tyranny, rather he claims to recognize the reality of necessary decay. If he counsels quickening the collapse, it is only because new possibilities will only emerge in the wake of decadence and tyranny. In the end, he looks at political life as bound to be tragic.

Beyond Pessimism

His tragic realism is not an account of simple decay. Indeed, a tragic view can inform an affirmative view of life, a culture that is life affirming, and a politics with realistic hopes. Nietzsche's tragic view does not leave him pessimistic, nor does it leave him to counsel withdrawal or resignation. Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy is quite distinct from any form of pessimism. Indeed, he comes to describe it as the remedy for pessimism. In light of such an understanding of the role of tragedy, Nietzsche's tragic view of politics is a spur to action, not resignation. The tragic sensibility he fosters aims to combat the twin problems involved in relating thought and action—ideological

³⁶Ibid., 154.

³⁷Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, 66.

³⁸Peter Berkowitz demonstrates that philosophic command, which he calls "right making based on right knowing," stands higher in Nietzsche's estimation of types than the grand conquerors whose health he lauds (*Nietzsche: Ethics of an Immoralist* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995], 244, 246). Laurence Lampert argues that Nietzsche ultimately pursues a philosophical politics. He argues, for example, that *Beyond Good and Evil* reveals philosophy's essentially political task (*Nietzsche's Task: An Interpretation of "Beyond Good and Evil"* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], 303).

optimism, which hopes for theory to translate into practice directly, on the one hand, and complete withdrawal, which abandons action as futile, on the other. In Nietzsche's account, both of these are symptoms of life-denying ways of thought. The one hopes to transform life into something it is not, ideals contrary to life, the other bears the seeds of otherworldly hopes as it abandons messy reality in favor of the image of some more permanent realm.

Having described the French Revolution in terms of the former, Nietzsche addresses the latter in the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Nietzsche describes Hamlet as a figure whose ambition neglects political action, not from indecision, but because he sees its inadequacy for changing the eternal (EH, Clever 4). In the face of eternity, Hamlet sees the futility of all action. In his early reflection on tragedy, Nietzsche describes Hamlet as an example of the view that "knowledge kills action" (BT 7). Yet, Nietzsche's reconsideration of *The Birth of Tragedy* rejects this sort of resignation born of Schopenhauerian pessimism and its denial of life. In the 1886 "Attempt at Self-Criticism," Nietzsche writes, "How differently Dionysus spoke to me! How far removed I was from all resignationism!" (BT, Attempt 6), and goes on to describe the Dionysian spirit of tragedy:

Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I guessed to be the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. (TI, Ancients 5)

The model of a tragic sensibility is not the tragic figure, paralyzed by his knowledge, but the tragic poet capable of seeing the world and its greatest conflicts, "beyond all terror and pity" (TI, Ancients 5). In accounting for Shakespeare's greatness, Hamlet's action-inhibiting knowledge does not suffice, for there is something in Shakespeare that does not leave him paralyzed by the same insights. Rather, "When I seek a formula for Shakespeare, I always find only this: he conceived of the type of Caesar" (EH, Clever 4). Nietzsche's final estimation of Shakespeare identifies his greatness with a tragedy of a man of action. Like Goethe's recognition of Napoleon, Shakespeare's conception of Julius Caesar conveys the rich realism of his presentation of human life. The highest examples of the tragic sensibility Nietzsche counsels are not the tragic heroes or the grand conquerors. Beyond whatever admiration may be due to Alcibiades, Caesar, and Napoleon, Nietzsche reserves his highest praise for the likes of Thucydides, Shakespeare, and Goethe. This need not suggest that art provides the model trumping politics for the sort of life Nietzsche praises.³⁹ Nietzsche

³⁹Nehamas claims that Nietzsche's estimable figure beyond good and evil is "always modeled on his view of literature and the arts" (Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985], 227). In so doing, he denies Nietzsche's efforts to foster an embrace of political realities. Nehamas goes so far as to explain away Nietzsche's praise for the likes of Alcibiades and Caesar,

praises authors like Shakespeare and Goethe for their capacity to see the reality of political figures. It is not for their creation, but for their insight, demonstrated most clearly to Nietzsche in political matters, that Nietzsche offers high praise. The authors Nietzsche lauds are all tragedians who are not only tragedians. They are capable of seeing the whole of human possibility with a realistic eye. Nietzsche presents philosophers as first in rank, not by presenting their role as removed from mere politics, but by attributing to them the political task of commanding and legislating.

Another Renaissance

Nietzsche's account of modernity as tragedy appears to leave a view of decline paralleling that of Thucydides for Greek civilization. Yet Nietzsche looks to the Renaissance both as the peak from which modernity is a descent and the precedent for renewal. His praise for the Italian Renaissance attributes to it "all the positive forces to which we owe modern culture" (HH 237). He ascribes to it a nobility that modernity has henceforth lacked: "There was, to be sure, in the Renaissance an uncanny and glittering reawakening of the classical ideal, of the noble mode of evaluating all things" (GM 1.16). He admires not merely the reawakening of classical learning, but the noble mode of valuing he attributes to Greek religion (BGE 49). Modernity may have come to be defined by ideological optimism godfathered by otherworldly ideals, but its Renaissance roots revive classical modes of valuing and noble confrontation with the reality of the world. The subsequent decline Nietzsche describes, beginning with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, serves to attach these initial sparks to otherworldly measures and compassionate aims.

In his early *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche describes the "great task of the Renaissance" as "the complete fusion of the ancient and modern spirit" (HH 237). In later work, Nietzsche claims "the great age—the Renaissance, for example—is a finale" (TI, Skirmishes 44). Here, describing the Renaissance as a pinnacle of human possibility, which squanders itself like the great human being, Nietzsche is less concerned with the effects that follow from it than he is with its exemplification of human flourishing. Embracing the temporal limits of such a peak, Nietzsche affirms a tragic view that accepts inevitable decline. The inevitability of decline need not lead to pessimism, for the aims

suggesting that Napoleon receives praise as an artist "steeped in world literature" (but his canvas is Europe), and that Nietzsche's praise of Caesar ignores the historical figure and concerns Shakespeare's Caesar (227). Rather than looking for literary creations, this praise involves looking to politics in order to praise a literary figure. Nietzsche looks to politics, to *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* in order to find adequate expression of Shakespeare's achievement.

of human life can be found in temporary flourishes rather than in some final goal or more permanent condition. Embracing the temporary as worthwhile, the possibility of a renaissance offers reason to affirm the whole, for renewal remains possible even if progress does not.

Nietzsche contrasts the possibility of such pinnacles with the view of progress:

We modern men, very tender, very easily hurt, and offering as well as receiving consideration a hundredfold, really have the conceit that this tender humanity which we represent, this attained unanimity in sympathetic regard, in readiness to help, in mutual trust, represents positive progress and that in this respect we are far above the men of the Renaissance. But that is how every age thinks, how it *must* think. What is certain is that we may not place ourselves in Renaissance conditions, not even by an act of thought: our nerves would not endure that reality, not to speak of our muscles. (TI, Skirmishes 37)

The strength represented by the Renaissance reveals modernity as decline, modern morality, "Schopenhauer's morality of pity," as "the movement of decadence in morality" (TI, Skirmishes 37). This decline is not a matter for despair, but its moral claims are found by Nietzsche to be laughable from the perspective of the Renaissance:

Let us not doubt that we moderns, with our thickly padded humanity, which at all costs wants to avoid bumping into a stone, would have provided Cesare Borgia's contemporaries with a comedy at which they could have laughed themselves to death. (TI, Skirmishes 37)

Borgia's audacity represents a noble realism to be contrasted with the morality of weakness that modern men exalt as progress. The Renaissance represents a peak because its challenge to received morality presents a superior nobility, a realism about effective political action, from which modernity is mere decline.⁴⁰

Yet, even as Nietzsche describes modern moral decline from the heights of the Renaissance, he reminds his readers of the very possibility of a renaissance. Viewed as a precedent, the Renaissance represents the possibility of noble valuing emerging amid morality of weakness, a possibility Nietzsche aims to foster. Beyond modern virtues of "work, modesty, legality, and scientism" (TI, Skirmishes 37), a postmodern nobility may emerge following the pattern of the Italian Renaissance. As the Renaissance provides a precedent, it could also be said to provide resources for such a renewal in the way that Rome does for the Italian Renaissance. He praises the naturalism of Renaissance art along with the audacity of political figures like Cesare Borgia and the thoroughgoing realism of Machiavelli.⁴¹

⁴⁰Cf. Machiavelli, *Prince*, chap. 7.

⁴¹HH, 237; BGE, 200; TI, Skirmishes 37; TI, Ancients 2.

Nietzsche aims to renew such a noble realism in political life. In doing so, he also looks to the ancients for a source of renewal. He owes to the ancients the realism of Thucydides' history and the Dionysian spirit that unifies the orgiastic and the tragic (TI, Ancients 2–5). Political realism, Dionysian mysteries, and tragic poetry all exemplify the affirmation of life capable of "Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems" (TI, Ancients 5). The tragic sense that Nietzsche admires and counsels stands at odds with pessimism; it entails an embrace of life and therewith its future possibilities. Without progressive optimism or otherworldly retreat, it embraces life with its difficulties and views the opportunities life affords as worthy of its great difficulties. In this spirit, Nietzsche anticipates the possibility of a future tragic age as the source for a new renaissance. He describes the political possibilities counseled by a tragic sense as capable of affirming life.

A Party of Life

Beyond idealism, pessimistic resignation, and the tyrannies of the twentieth century, Nietzsche "look[s] a century hence" and envisions a "party of life" coming about in a new "tragic age" (EH, BT 4). After the wars of the twentieth century, new possibilities emerge, which Nietzsche hopes to play a role in shaping a new nobility. Conway argues that Nietzsche's hopes for the future proceed through "parastrategesis," a dangerous game through which he hopes to ensure a future audience who will imbue his doctrines with positive meaning.⁴² While Conway's account sheds light on Nietzsche's hopes for future readers among a new aristocracy of a new European empire, his denial of the positive meaning of Nietzsche's affirmative teachings rejects the possibility that Nietzsche may offer guidance for figures of "a tragic age" beyond the century of decadence he sees. A full explanation of Nietzsche's account of nobility is beyond the scope of this essay, but Nietzsche clearly describes the responsibility (BGE 272) and the virtues (BGE 284) characteristic of a new nobility. Furthermore, he offers a measure for it: "Saying Yes to life even its strangest and hardest problems" (TI, Ancients 5). This capacity to say yes to life is attributed to the capacity for political realism. Noble confrontation with the reality of political life, rather than dreams of cultural revival, wins praise from Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, such realism requires acknowledging that decadent modern politics will continue to decay into tyranny, that European empire will be a necessary result, and that new possibilities may emerge after a century of decay, tyranny, and

⁴²He describes this strategy as an "esotericism for decadents" and claims that Nietzsche's work ultimately lacks a positive teaching (Conway, *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game*, 152–70).

war. Nietzsche makes clear that a new nobility will possess a tragic sensibility and look at politics in a realist manner conditioned by tragedy.

Beyond the ideological hubris of the twentieth century, Nietzsche indeed expects a postmodern age, and he expects it to be a pluralistic age, but it will be pluralistic only insofar as it is tragic. The future tragic age will entail the recovery of a tragic sensibility obscured by modernity and its claims to reconcile fundamental human conflicts and bring final resolutions. Adherents to such a party of life will be conditioned by the tragedy of modern hubris. The ideologies of the nineteenth century will have produced the great wars of the twentieth. Ideological politics will produce the tragedies of the twentieth century precisely because they view political order in a manner contrary to human life and long for ideals counter to the world as it is. Such hubristic ambitions can only produce tragic collapse. Individuals conditioned by the recognition of this tragedy—and perhaps also strengthened by the wars it produces—will constitute a new party of life that bears a tragic sensibility. They will emerge when “humanity has weathered the consciousness of the hardest but most necessary wars *without suffering from it*” (EH, BT 4). They will have gained the strength of spirit not to resent the world in favor of an imagined world. In the final pages of *Twilight of the Idols*, he connects the spirit of realism, Dionysian mysteries, the tragic poet, and his teaching of eternal return. Realism and tragedy stand together as the most significant precedents for the life-affirming aims he claims as fundamental to his work.

The politics of Nietzsche's realist vision would entail contest that could be a source for the strength of political orders. Yet, there is no reason to expect a politics of contest to take the form of agonistic democracy as some theorists have envisioned.⁴³ A politics of contest does not include anything that will restrain it to a democratic form, and Nietzsche makes abundantly clear that the contest of politics will likely produce victors and even commanders. Neither the form of any contest nor the content of any victory will be permanent. The contest will be continuous not by restraining it within sustainable democratic forms, but because of the tragic character of every order. Each will either undermine itself by its own success or generate opposition from what it must exclude. There is no reason to expect such contests to remain within political borders; rather, they are likely to expand beyond any institutional restraints. Nietzsche's tragic realism would counsel an attitude toward war that is different from modern hopes to end war or for treaties that eliminate the possibility of war. Nietzsche's tragic realism would counsel an expectation of conflict born of deep and irreconcilable conflicts in human life. Because one people and one set of institutions will have

⁴³William Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 9–24, 210–22; Lawrence J. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodernism* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995); Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought*.

values different from others—and none will embrace all possibilities—inevitably, clashes will not be resolved by resorting to shared principles. As the party of life would reject eschatological hopes and ideological politics, it would see in these the hubris that sought to alter the reality of human beings fundamentally, and the delusion of hopes for successful resolution to the defining conflicts of human life.

This tragic realism provides a sort of guidance for political action different from the radically reductionist sort of realism that views states as self-interested rational actors competing for power regardless of the character, form, or ideology of its internal politics. Yet, neither would it share with any form of ideological imperialism the view that one regime type (e.g., constitutional democracy) or ideology (e.g., Marxism) could overcome those conflicts. It would recognize that conflicts are sometimes born from aspirations not reducible to calculable interests. It would not expect a rational order that could reconcile those principles. It would see the strength of politics that did not seek to resort to first principles, but gave expression to aspirations that could be ordered for a time. It would not expect principles promising to eliminate the possibility of tyranny, though it would view the effort to resist tyranny as a source of strength and nobility. Schooled in the tragedy of modern eschatological hubris, a party of life would recognize limited and temporary goals for politics. The new renaissance of a tragic age would eschew ideological hopes without abandoning political life; it would recognize the limits of political action without thereby fleeing from all action. Maintaining the spirit of action in a world where no solutions are final and no achievements are permanent characterizes the all-embracing love for life that Nietzsche promotes. Such an ambitious spirit will define a new nobility and spur its achievements, just as it chastens idealizing hopes.