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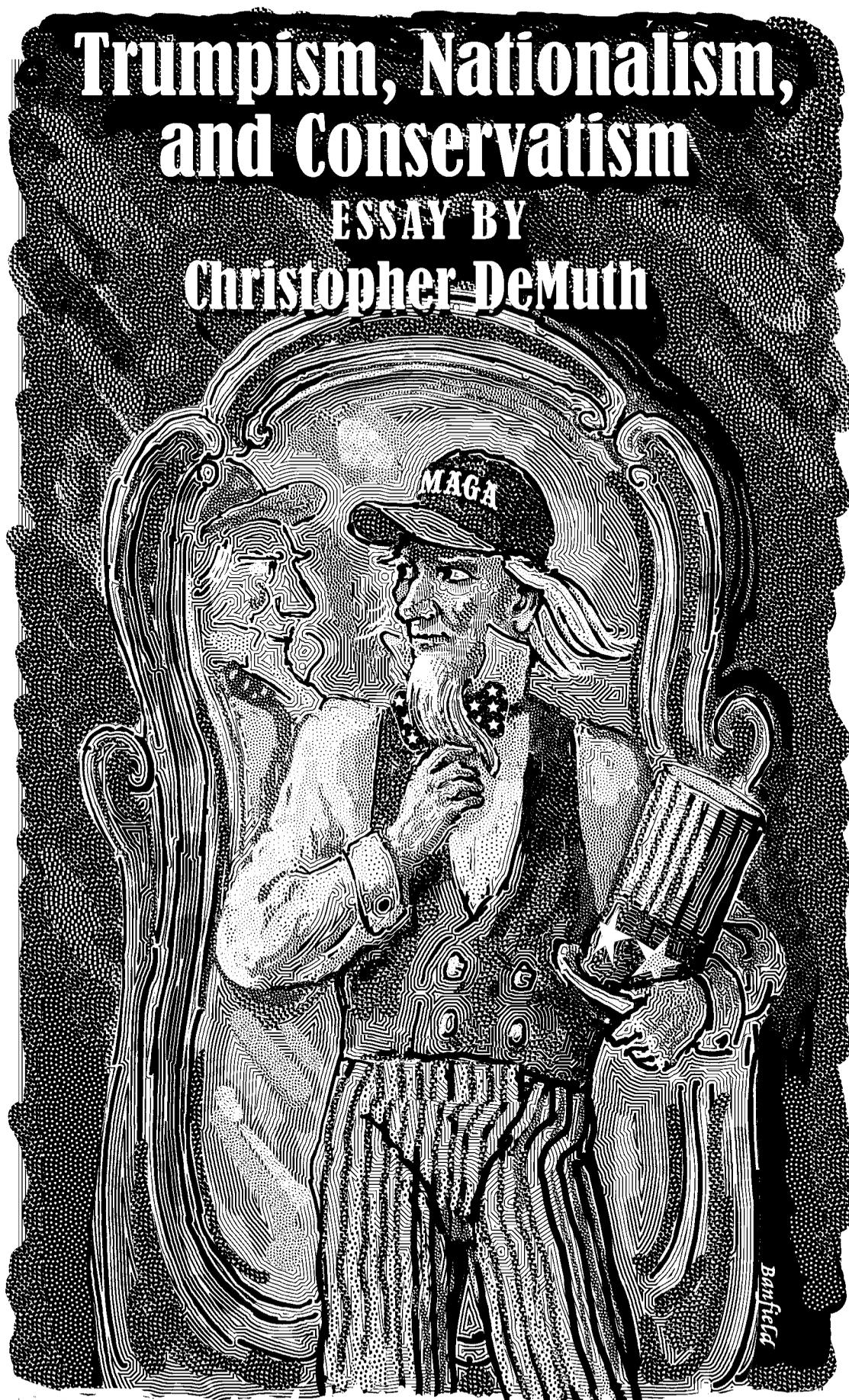
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Book Review by Joseph Epstein

RUINED BY HIS OWN GLORY

Nemesis: Alcibiades and the Fall of Athens, by David Stuttard.
Harvard University Press, 400 pages, \$29.95



ALCIBIADES WILL ALWAYS HAVE A prominent place in the rogues' gallery of history. Son of Cleinias, nephew and, after his father's death at the Battle of Coronea, ward of Pericles, he was at different times the enemy of three competing empires: the Athenian, the Spartan, the Persian. A rogue is not necessarily villainous, but he is aberrant, unpredictable, often attractive, rarely dull. He is also, inevitably, in business for himself. Alcibiades qualifies on all counts. A note of dubiety is struck straight off by Thucydides when he first introduces Alcibiades more than halfway through his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. There we are told that Alcibiades was the leader of the opposition to the Athenian treaty signed with Sparta in

421 B.C., which initiated the so-called Peace of Nicias before being abandoned in 414. He felt his own participation in the war leading up to the peace had been ignored because of his youth, and that "considerations of his own dignity affected his opposition to the peace with Sparta." History, for Alcibiades, was, in the cant phrase of our day, all about him.

NEMESIS, DAVID STUTTARD'S BIOGRAPHY of Alcibiades, sets out, in admirably clear detail, the twists and turns in the life of its subject. Stuttard, an Englishman, is an independent scholar (someone doing serious scholarship without a permanent university affiliation) devoted to the worthy mission of popularizing classical

subjects, through books, translation, and directing plays. *Nemesis*, as its author allows, is a book "not for the specialist but for the general reader," one that he hopes "will prove not just instructive but entertaining, too," and he is correct on both counts.

Such flaws as the book presents are minor, and chief among these is that Stuttard's prose can sometimes lapse into a purple more striking than Alcibiades' robe. He also on occasion avails himself of clipped sentence fragments: "The admiral, Astyochus, had received fresh, urgent orders. From Sparta and King Agis. To put Alcibiades to death." The device is meant to heighten the drama, but its effect is instead to divert one's attention from the action to the author. Stuttard also has what might just



be the winning entry in the this year's goofy acknowledgments sweepstakes, citing "the crucial role played at all times by our two cats, Stanley and Oliver, as handsome, demanding, and enigmatic as Alcibiades, but considerably more faithful."

Nemesis is a work of synthesis, but one of great scrupulosity. Scarcely a paragraph in the book is without its footnote. These notes refer to the wide literature on the Peloponnesian War generally and to Alcibiades in particular. The three great sources on the latter are Thucydides, Plato, and Plutarch; the first two knew the man; the third (A.D. 46-120), born nearly 600 years after Alcibiades (born 452 B.C.), provides the most complete account. Among current-day writers, Stuttard leans most heavily on the Yale classicist Donald Kagan. Stuttard also mentions in one of his notes a Freudian interpretation of Alcibiades, which I've not yet but should one day be amused to read, if only to discover if Alcibiades suffered an Empire Complex, Pericles Envy, Narcissism, Sex Addiction, or all of the above. The possibilities here are boundless.

ALCIBIADES' WAS THE ART OF SEDUCTION. "As a boy, he enticed husbands from their wives," Stuttard writes, "as a young man wives from their husbands." As he grew older, the stakes rose, and he set out to seduce entire empires—the Athenian, the Spartan, the Persian in turn—and in each instance met with more than a modicum of success. What he really wanted was dominance over the known world. When he proposed to the Athenians their expedition to conquer Syracuse, he added that, while at it, they might next go on to conquer Carthage. Alcibiades was, *avant la lettre*, an Alexander the Great, but an Alexander *manqué*.

By all accounts Alcibiades had astonishing physical beauty. According to Plutarch, this beauty "bloomed in him in all the ages of his life, in his infancy, in his youth, and in his manhood; and, in the peculiar character becoming to each of these periods, gave him, in every one of them, a grace and a charm." A detailed account of his good looks is not known, but what is certain is that he had the vanity to go along with them. As a youth, he is said to have rejected learning to play the aulos, an oboe-like instrument, because blowing on it distorted his face. He had a lisp, supplying the letter "l" when "r" was indicated. So much admired was he among the young that it is said that the aulos went out of fashion and lisps came into fashion in the Athens of his day.

Alcibiades' relationship with Socrates—they comprised the oddest of odd couples—is not the least fascinating strand of his biogra-

phy. The philosopher claimed to discern great potential in Alcibiades, and put in much time attempting to bring it out while simultaneously hoping to smother his waywardness. For his part, Alcibiades esteemed Socrates above all men, recognizing his depth and his virtue. In the *Symposium*, Plato, in an ancient world version of a student evaluation, has Alcibiades remark (in Michael Joyce's translation):

Socrates is the only man in the world who can make me feel ashamed. Because there's no getting away from it, I know I ought to do the things he tells me to: and yet the moment I'm out of his sight I don't care what I do to keep in with the mob. So I dash off like a runaway slave, and keep out of his way as long as I can; and then next time I meet him I remember all that I had to admit the time before, and naturally I feel ashamed. There are times when I'd honestly be glad to hear that he was dead, and yet I know that if he did die I'd be more upset than ever.

At an Athenian expedition to Potidaea, in Macedonia, Alcibiades fell wounded. Socrates,

The standard moral categories somehow do not seem to apply to Alcibiades.

at risk to his own life, stood over him, saving him from the enemy. Yet it was Alcibiades, based in part on his noble birth, and in part on Socrates' recommendation, who was awarded a prize for valor at Potidaea. Later, at the Battle of Delium, Plutarch tells us, when the Athenians were routed, when Socrates with other foot-soldiers was in retreat, "Alcibiades, who was on horseback, observing it, would not pass on, but stayed to shelter him from the danger, and brought him safe off, though the enemy pressed hard upon them, and cut off many."

IN THE *SYMPOSIUM* PLATO HAS ALCIBIADES claim to have offered himself to Socrates, an exchange, as Socrates formulates it, of physical for mental qualities. Alcibiades tells of mounting Socrates' couch, wrapping his cloak around him, creeping under [Socrates'] own rather shabby mantle, and—nothing! "[B]elieve it, gentleman, or believe it not," Alcibiades tells the participants in the *Symposium*, "when I got up next morning I had no more *slept* with Socrates, within

the meaning of the act, than if he'd been my father or an elder brother." With the result, Alcibiades concludes, that he felt both humiliation and "admiration for [Socrates'] manliness and self-control, for this was strength of mind such as I had never hoped to meet."

This wasn't sufficient to cause Alcibiades to cease playing the genial screw-off, and to the highest power. Plutarch reports that he "intermingled exorbitant luxury and wantonness, in his eating and drinking and dissolute living." Thucydides, remarking on his extravagance, noted that "most people became frightened at a quality in him which was beyond the normal and showed itself both in the lawlessness of his private life and habits and in the spirit in which he acted on all occasions."

Somehow it seems foolhardy to moralize about Alcibiades. Michel de Montaigne quotes or cites Alcibiades no fewer than ten times in his *Essays*, neither praising nor condemning but largely fascinated by the grandeur and swagger of the man. In *Antiquity Matters* (2017), Frederic Raphael asks whether Alcibiades behaved any worse than other Greeks. Raphael reminds us that Themistocles went over to the Persians, the Spartan king Demaratus traveled with Xerxes, and Achilles, by petulantly withdrawing from the battlefield because Agamemnon appropriated his war trophy (the maiden Briseis), caused the death of many Greeks at Troy.

CORNELIUS NEPOS, IN HIS *LIVES OF Eminent Commanders* (the Palatine Press edition), notes that Alcibiades was, "when occasion required, laborious, patient, courteous, liberal, and splendid, no less in his public than in his private life; he was also affable and courteous, conforming dexterously to circumstances; but when he had unbent himself, and no reason offered why he should endure the labor of thought, was seen to be luxurious, dissolute, voluptuous, and self-indulgent, so that all wondered there should be such dissimilitude, and so contradictory a nature, in the same man." The standard moral categories, in any case, somehow do not seem to apply to him.

The two express tickets to advancement in the ancient world were military prowess and oratory, and Alcibiades held both. Of his oratorical skills, Stuttard writes that "he would become one of Athens' leading orators," roundly admired for his abilities—"he knew exactly what to say in any situation"—and "in time the whole of Athens regarded them with awe." Oratory is of course, then as now, the art of persuasion, rarely the vehicle of truth. Alcibiades and truth didn't much mix.

Behind Alcibiades' every move—his most cunning calculation, his rashest reckless-

ness—was the motive of personal glory. Of the democratic faction in Athens, no one was more mindful of his own personal fortunes than he. When in 415 he helped argue Athens into its fateful Sicilian expedition, against the sensible warning of the Athenian general Nicias, who saw the folly of Athens entering on two major wars at once, Alcibiades did so chiefly in the hope of self-aggrandizement. As Thucydides reports, his motives were “his desire to hold the command and his hopes that it would be through him that Sicily and Carthage would be conquered—successes which would at the same time bring him personally both wealth and honor.” If Alcibiades may seem unattractive when in pursuit of power, it is worth recalling that the only parties less attractive than those pursuing power are those who have already attained it. Plutarch felt that “[c]ertainly, if ever man was ruined by his own glory it was Alcibiades.”

When Alcibiades was called back to Athens to stand trial for the destruction of the herms—the statues of Hermes set in public places in the hope of protection from the god—and for his presumably mocking the religious rite known as the Eleusian mysteries, he fled instead to enemy Sparta. While there he went native, let his hair grow out in the Spartan manner, dispensed with his ornate wardrobe, ate the drear dark porridge that was the staple of the Spartan diet. He advised, quite sensibly, the Spartans on the best military strategy to take up against the Athenians. And to pass the time he seduced and made pregnant Timaea, the wife of the Spartan King Agis. (Spartan women were notoriously free with their favors.) Plutarch reports that Alcibiades “would say, in his vain way, he had not done this thing out of mere wantonness or insult, nor to gratify a passion, but that his race might one day be kings over the Lacedaemonians.” Later, when the Spartans, led by the properly resentful Agis, grew suspicious of Alcibiades, he went over to the Persian satrap Tissaphernes, whom he charmed out of his silken trousers. As he had earlier advised the Spartans about how to defeat the Athenians, he now advised the Persians how to weaken both the Athenians and Spartans by allowing them to fight out an under-financed war of attrition.

OWING TO AN ELABORATELY COMPLICATED concatenation of events, of plans made and others gone awry, Alcibiades would return to Athens in 407. This was eight years after the disastrous Sicilian expedition, which he had done so much to promote. He was 43. He claimed to long for his native *polis*, and held that he had never truly betrayed it but only the simulacrum of it that existed after his forced departure. When he sailed into the Piraeus, he was greeted with music and flowers as a returning hero. A much weakened Athens looked to him to restore its grandeur. As Stuttard recounts: “They voted to make him general-in-chief, *strategos autocrator*, with supreme command on land and sea, the most powerful man in Athens.... In democratic Athens, it was the greatest honor he could ever hope for, the pinnacle of his ambition.”

So great was the esteem in which Alcibiades was now held, so desperate were the Athenians for leadership, that some among them—“the lower and meaner sort of people,” in Plutarch’s phrasing—wanted to abrogate all the city’s laws and allow him to govern as tyrant. Whether this would have been just fine with Alcibiades we cannot know. Cooler heads thought it best to send him on a military mission against the Lacedaemonians at Andros. With a fleet of 100 triremes (ancient galleys), he was able to do this easily enough. But the difficulty came when, after this victory, he entrusted this fleet to a lieutenant, one Antiochus, who, against Alcibiades’ orders not to engage the Spartans, lost much of it to Lysander at Ephesus. The loss, along with denting his newfound reputation for military infallibility, played into the hands of Alcibiades’ enemies at Athens, who were able to bruit about rumors of his luxurious habits and irresponsibility causing the defeat and thus strip him of his supreme command. Once again Alcibiades was in business for himself.

Freelance now, leading a band of mercenaries, he ventured into Thrace, where he won the favor of a local governor named Seuthes, and through him of the Thracian king, Medocus. Stuttard writes that “just as in Persia and in Sparta, he had quickly adopted local customs, so, in Thrace, he effort-

lessly transformed into a Thracian.” Which meant heavy boozing, displays of horsemanship, and whoring—at all of which Alcibiades was long proficient. But soon enough his Thracian gig was up, too, especially after the Athenian defeat at Aegospotami in 405, where the Spartans under Lysander wiped out the entire Athenian fleet of 160 triremes and put to death more than 3,000 Athenian captives. The Peloponnesian War, 27 years long, ended the following year.

AFTER AEGOSPOTAMI, ALCIBIADES’ many enemies coalesced against him: Lysander and Agis in Sparta; Critias, the dominant figure among the Thirty Tyrants put in charge of Athens by the Spartans; and finally the Persians, who could not afford to harbor him lest doing so damage their peace pact with Sparta. He was on his own, which is to say utterly abandoned. In a house in Sardis, accompanied by two courtesans, he awoke one night to find the smell of smoke in the air and his weapons missing. Naked, armed only with a blanket and his short sword, he ran out of the burning building to meet with a cascade of arrows and javelins. “All Alcibiades could do,” Stuttard writes, “was run into the night, and run, and keep on running while he could until the night engulfed him.” When they discovered his body, his courtesan lovers, Timandra and Theodote, were unable to close his eyes, for his bloodless head had been lopped off and was presented as a trophy to the Persian satrap Farnavaz, as conclusive evidence of his death.

David Stuttard’s biography is well titled. Nemesis, recall, was the Greek goddess who doled out happiness and misery to mortals—a cruel lady who took particular pleasure in visiting disaster on those too richly endowed by nature. She must have spit on her palms and rubbed them enthusiastically together at the prospect presented by Alcibiades. With his good looks, his several talents, his surpassing ambition, his overweening pride, Alcibiades, clearly, was her kind of guy.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of Charm: The Elusive Enchantment (Lyons Press).

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