

ANTI-DECADENCE DISCOURSE IN THE LATIN LITERATURE OF THE EARLY EMPIRE*

Abstract: A cultural reaction began to be articulated in Augustan Rome against the hitherto predominant interpretation of Roman history in terms of decline. Through the close examination of passages from Livy (26.22), Horace (Ep. 2.1) and Ovid (Ars 3.113–132), it is demonstrated in this paper that writers intended to establish an implicit or explicit dialogue with the newly established *principatus*, commenting precisely on Augustan decline discourse. It is then argued that the political dimension is also present in anti-decadence theories in the Latin literature of the first and early second century A.D. However, Seneca (Ben. 1.10, Ep. 97) and Tacitus (Dial. 18.3, Ann. 3.55) question the validity of decadence theories, insisting on the universal character of decadence throughout all ages and societies. A gradual shift is observed, from the questioning of decadence theory towards the acknowledgment of its intellectual necessity for mankind.

Keywords: decadence, anti-decadence, decline, anti-decline, Livy, Horace, Ovid, Seneca, Tacitus

Introduction: ‘decadence’ and ‘anti-decadence’

Ancient literature, especially Latin literature of the late Republic, is indeed pervaded by the fixed idea of decadence. Without aiming to provide here a thorough exploration of Greek or Roman theories of decadence, it should be noted that the perception of the past as morally superior is already extant in Cato, who warns against the moral consequences of the introduction of luxury to Rome.¹ It was also a kind of fashion among Roman historians to try to pinpoint the beginning of Rome’s gradual moral degeneration, most usually associating it with the expansion of Roman *imperium*:² Polybius,

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1) See on this idea Cato fr. 66, 76, 85, 87, 108, 138, 141–149, 152–153, 163–164, 171–173, 193 ORF⁴; Hist. fr. 87–88; 109, 113, 119, 144–145 FRHist. On Cato’s decadence discourse see Biesinger 2016, 59–92.

2) See on this tendency Knoche 1938.

for instance, dates it as early as the battle of Pydna in 168 B. C.,³ and discusses the profound reasons for the decadence of States, based on his famous cyclical theory of the *anacyclosis* of governments, which he also applies to Rome;⁴ Calpurnius Piso claims that *pu-dicitia* began to be subverted in 154 B. C.;⁵ in Posidonius⁶ and in Sallust,⁷ the destruction of Carthage in 146 B. C. is analysed as a key point for the moral and political decline of the *res publica*, because it meant the removal of *metus hostilis*. Beyond attributing the introduction of *luxuria* to Rome to the triumph of Manlius around 187 B. C.,⁸ Livy moves a step forward, by presenting the progress and subsequent decline of the *res publica* as the major theme of his work.⁹ Decline discourses can also be found in the Latin literature of the Early Empire, whose writers often express the sense of living in a period of cultural rather than political decline,¹⁰ which often reflects the decadence of morals.¹¹

3) See Polyb. 31.25.3 ff.; 18.35.1.

4) See Polyb. 6.9,51,57. For a detailed discussion of Polybius' theory of *anacyclosis*, see von Fritz 1954, 60–75; Walbank 1957, ad loc.; Pédech 1964, 303–330.

5) See Calp. Hist. fr. 38 Peter = 41 Chassignet = 48 Forsythe = 41 FRH = 40 FRHist (= Plin. HN 17.244). See for an interpretation of the historian's historical reconstruction the editors' comments ad loc. See also Sordi 1988; Berti 1989.

6) See Posidon. fr. 112 FGrHist. = fr. 178 Theiler (= D. S. 35, fr. 26.5–6), with Gelzer 1931; Hoffmann 1960, 340–344; Hackl 1980.

7) See Sal. Catil. 10; Jug. 41; Hist. fr. 1.11–12 Maurenbrecher = 9–12 Ramsey = 1.15–16 La Penna-Funari, with Earl 1961, 42–47; Bonamente 1975; McGushin 1977, 87–88; Latta 1988; idem 1989; Levene 2000; Dunsch 2006; Biesinger 2016, 96–106, 113–117.

8) See Liv. 39.6.7–9 and Luce 1977, 254–260; Biesinger 2016, 178–184.

9) See Liv. praef. 9: *ad illa mihi pro se quisque acriter intendat animum, quae uita, qui mores fuerint, per quos uiros quibusque artibus domi militiaeque et partum et auctum imperium sit; labente deinde paulatim disciplina uelut desidentis primo mores sequatur animo, deinde ut magis magisque lapsi sint, tum ire coeperint praecipites, donec ad haec tempora, quibus nec uita nostra nec remedia pati possumus, peruentum est*. See also Liv. praef. 11–12. On Livy's theory of decadence in the preface and its relationship to Sallust's theory, see among others Amundsen 1947; Ogilvie 1965, ad loc.; Mazza 1967, 69–75; Paschalis 1980, 110–126; Woodman 1988, 130–132; Seita 1996, 13, 16, 18–19; Burton 2008, 78–79; Vassiliades 2020, 107–114, 550–556.

10) See Williams 1978, 6–51; Döpp 1989. More generally on ideas of moral decline in Flavian poetry, namely Silius Italicus, Lucan and Statius, see Gibson 2010, 40–44. See also Dominik 2006 and Augoustakis 2015, who argue that the origins of Rome's decline in Silius Italicus were apparent from the Second Punic War.

11) See e.g. Liv. 7.25.9, 7.40.2, 8.11.1, 10.9.6, 10.40.10; Sen. Controv. 1. pr. 8–10; Petron. 88; Sen. Ep. 114.1–2, 8–12; Plin. HN 14.1.2–6.

The ancient articulation of decadence, especially during the Late Republic, has already been investigated by many scholars, not only in studies dealing with the particular theories of each author,¹² but also in more elaborate studies attempting an holistic approach to ancient decadence theories: some scholars are confined to a general presentation and interpretation of views on decline during Antiquity;¹³ others use ancient authors of the Late Republic as a historical source for evaluating Rome's moral transformation after the conquests,¹⁴ whereas Werner and Engels attempted a philosophical reading of decadence theories, focusing on various aspects of the interpretation of decline by Late Republican authors.¹⁵ Biesinger recently discussed the ideological and literary purposes of the discourse on decadence in Latin literature.¹⁶

Despite having focused much on the ancient theory of decadence, scholars have not investigated the existence or otherwise of an opposite discourse in ancient literature. This paper aims to show that, next to the universal predisposition to criticising the present and praising the past, ancient authors, and more precisely Early Imperial authors, also developed an anti-decadence discourse. To this purpose, I will place particular emphasis on the way the writers discussed reveal the weaknesses and schematic elements of decadence theories which they claim to be predominant in their historical and cultural context, in an attempt to nuance or even contest their validity.

The short wordings 'anti-decadence' and 'anti-decline', which I have chosen to describe such discourses, are meant as counterparts to the nouns 'decadence' and 'decline'. The latter notions¹⁷

12) See the previous footnotes on each author for these studies.

13) Freund 1984, 27–57, presents a panorama of these ideas during Antiquity; de Romilly 1997 focuses on Greek historians, namely Herodotus, Thucydides and Polybius; Bracher 1987 studied Roman theories of progress and decline in the Early Empire; Fuhrer 2014, 24–33, deals in more detail with authors of the Late Empire.

14) See Hampl 1956; Lintott 1972; Bringmann 1977.

15) See Knoche 1938; Werner 1939; Engels 2009.

16) Biesinger 2016.

17) For a detailed history of the term 'decadence', see Chaunu 1981, 67–85; Freund 1984, 7–9; Frétygné / Jankowiak 2008, 3–8. See also Vassiliades 2020, 17–19, where "décadence" is defined as a gradual process of falling, leading from a 'higher', namely better or ideal from a moral point of view, to a 'lower' condition. This pro-

are usually used to refer to ancient theories analysing the past from an ideal standpoint as morally better than the present.¹⁸ The terms ‘anti-decadence’ and ‘anti-decline’ discourse should thus imply any discourse questioning the validity of the interpretation of the past as morally superior to the present. In the preface to the second book of his *Discourses on Livy*, Niccolò Machiavelli offers a telling example of such anti-decline discourse:

Men do always (sempre), but not always with reason (ma non sempre ragionevolmente), commend the past and condemn the present, and are so much the partisans of what has been, as not merely to cry up those times which are known to them only from the records left by historians, but also, when they grow old, to extol the days in which they remember their youth to have been spent.

(Transl. Thomson 2012, 146)

Machiavelli’s aphoristic statement is an expression of criticism against decadence discourse, which does not, of course, refer exclusively to Antiquity: his use of the adverb ‘always’ attributes the tendency of idealisation of the past to all mankind and seems to exclude the possibility that this decadence discourse was ever questioned before the Renaissance. I have selected the example of Latin literature of the Early Empire as the most appropriate to demonstrate that anti-decline discourses, similar to the Italian philosopher’s, had already been articulated during Antiquity, for two reasons. On the one hand, the theory of decadence, which had been developing since the early 2nd century B. C., reaches its culmination during the Augustan period, especially in the work of Livy, Machiavelli’s object of study, who, as already explained, dedicates his work to the examination of the causes of Rome’s greatness and decline. It can be assumed that the elaborated discourse on decadence would create the cultural preconditions encouraging the emergence of an opposite discourse.

cess of falling does not necessarily bring about ultimate ruin, in contrast to what is implied by the notion of “déclin”. Since it is not always possible to know whether the theories criticised by the authors examined here assume an open end to the process of moral and political fall or not, the terms decadence and decline will be used as synonyms in this paper.

18) As Rocchi / Mussini 2017, 7–8, pointed out, discourses on decadence are inscribed in the general conception of the past in axiological terms, as a value or disvalue.

Moreover, anti-decadence theories are expected to develop in the context of gradual transition from Republic to Empire for two reasons related to the ideological self-promotion of the Augustan regime: on the one hand, decadence theories could be – and indeed were¹⁹ – exploited by the newly established *principatus* as a justification for the Augustan project; they should thus be nuanced or even contested by anyone intending to eliminate arguments from the regime regarding the necessity of a moral change. On the other hand, the monarchical regime promoted itself and its reforms as a restoration of the ancient *res publica* and its values, which would put an end to the evils of civil wars.²⁰ The portrayal of Augustan rule as a return to a mythical Golden Age, which is reflected, for instance, in Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, is also intended to illustrate the idea that Rome's course to decline has hopefully been reversed.²¹ The hitherto predominant decadence discourse needed thus to be gradually replaced and nuanced by an anti-decadence discourse, because without such an ideological shift it would be difficult for the regime to proclaim the end of decadence through the return to pristine values.

It must then be explored whether anti-decadence discourse is also present in the rest of the Latin literature of the Early Empire. The purpose is to compare the concrete expression of anti-decline discourses in different historical and political contexts, meaning different Roman contexts: since the *principatus* has now been firmly established, the purpose of anti-decadence discourses would be to nuance or challenge the opinion that monarchy had led Roman politics, morals or culture to decadence. The texts taken into account

19) See on this infra, the discussion on Ovid, especially regarding the *lex Iulia*.

20) On the slogan of *res publica restituta* as characteristic of the self-portrayal of the Augustan regime, see Judge 1974; Mackie 1986; Ferrary 2003; Hurler / Mineo 2009, *passim* (espec. 9–22, 49–99, 119–128). Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 239ff., 258, argues that Augustus represents discontinuity as continuity, through the representation of his social and political reforms as a return to ancient values. On the rather limited echo of the slogan of *res publica restituta* in Augustan poetry, cf. Mutschler 2011.

21) See Hor. Saec. 53–60; Verg. Aen. 6.792–794, with Deproost 2008, 47–53; Günther 2013a; Hollard 2016. On the iconographic representation of the Augustan ideology of the *aurea aetas*, see Zanker 1987, 171–196.

assume the existence of and reply to such views. On the basis of this comparison, we can deduce the common characteristics of the various theories which could be considered universal or at least applicable to the ancient Romans in general, and the new elements attributable to the different literary and historical context of each theory.

It is important to note that the present study is concerned primarily with decadence and anti-decadence theories applied to the field of politics and morals. Decline and anti-decline discourses in relation to literature are explored only if and to the extent to which they are associated by the authors examined with developments in politics and morals.²² The close examination of key texts articulating such anti-decline discourse will allow a much deeper understanding of the nature and purpose of these theories.

Anti-decadence discourse in Augustan literature

The first author taken into account does not himself articulate an anti-decadence theory, but he does provide important evidence that traditionalism, accompanied by the conviction that ancient moral standards had declined, was strongly criticised in Augustan Rome. As noted above, in Livy's praef. 9, the exploration of the stages and causes of Rome's progress and decadence is set as the central subject of the *AVC*. Some paragraphs below, the historian emphatically stresses that moral degeneration is a recent development in Rome's history:

Ceterum aut me amor negotii suscepti fallit, aut nulla unquam res publica nec maior nec sanctor nec bonis exemplis ditior fuit, nec in quam ciuitatem tam serae auaritia luxuriaque inmigrauerint, nec ubi tantus ac tam diu paupertati ac parsimoniae honos fuerit: adeo quanto rerum minus, tanto minus cupiditatis erat: nuper diuitiae auaritiam et abundantes uoluptates desiderium per luxum atque libidinem pereundi pendique omnia inuexere.

(Liv. praef. 11–12)

22) Decadence theories have been applied to various fields, such as the philosophy of history and of the evolution of societies, art and science. The reader may refer to the following useful syntheses on the vast subject of theory of decadence since the 18th century: Freund 1984, 105–353; Frétygné / Jankowiak 2008.

For the rest, either love of the task I have set myself deceives me, or no state was ever greater, none more righteous or richer in good examples, none ever was where avarice and luxury made their entrance so late, or where humble means and thrift were so highly esteemed and so long held in honour. For true it is that the less men's wealth was, the less was their greed. Of late, riches have brought in avarice, and excessive pleasures the longing to carry wantonness and licence to the point of ruin for oneself and of universal destruction.

(Transl. B. O. Foster [LOEB 1919]).

This passage, along with praef. 9, promotes the image of Livy as a full adherent of a theory of decadence which, starting from a relatively recent point in Roman history, has been gradually accelerating until the historian's age, following a linear pattern. The introduction of *luxuria* is dated by Livy himself to 187 B.C. following the expeditions of Manlius in Asia Minor, although signs of decadence had already started to manifest during the Second Punic War.²³ Livy's attachment to such a linear conception of history cannot be doubted, but some nuance needs to be introduced as far as the author's analysis of Rome's early history is concerned. Throughout the first five books of the *AVC*, relating this period, the historian presents a series of political and moral crises in the context of the struggles between the orders or the conquests of Rome. *Discordia*, *ambitio* and *avaritia* were already present during this period of Roman history. The most characteristic episode illustrating all these tendencies was the discord following the conquest of Veii until the Gaulish invasion and the rebuilding of the city (Liv. 5.20–55).²⁴ Nevertheless, this should not lead to the conclusion that there is a contradiction between the schemes of decadence exposed in the prologue and in the narrative. In a detailed examination of all these 34 episodes, I have tried to point out that Livy analyses all of them, however serious they may have been, as resolved crises which do not negate either the overall high moral standards

23) See on this point my detailed analysis in Vassiliades 2020, 139–146, 163–170 with earlier bibliography.

24) This has led some scholars such as Miles 1995, 75–109 and Mineo 2006, *idem* 2015 to attribute to Livy a cyclical pattern of history, by interpreting the end of Book 5 as the end of the first cycle of Rome's history. Cf. Vassiliades 2020, 125–126.

of the early Romans or Livy's conception of the whole of Rome's history in terms of progress and subsequent decline.²⁵

Returning to the above cited passage, which highlights the historian's vision of Rome's decline, it is worth noting that before elaborating the latter vision, Livy adopts a defensive posture, stating that his own view may be due to the love of his task which deceives him (*aut me amor negotii suscepti fallit*). Livy's circumspection shows that he is aware of the existence of alternative views on Roman moral history which might question the pertinence of his own decadence scheme. I argued elsewhere that Livy's statement might be a critical reply to Sallust's decline scheme in *Histories*.²⁶ In his last work, Livy's predecessor tends to view the whole of Roman history, with the exception of the brief period after the kings' exile and the period between the Second and the Third Punic wars, as more and more increasingly marked by moral and political vices.²⁷ By contrast, Livy's vocabulary highlights the recent character of Rome's moral degeneration (*tam serae, tam diu, nuper*). Beyond Sallust, however, Livy might also have in mind people who completely refuse to accept that the contemporary *res publica* is a decadent form of an earlier, morally superior political society. Livy insists that the existence of such a morally exceptional State has been a historical reality, which one can discover by studying Rome's history until even recent times. This assumption cannot be proved by what is explicitly stated in the preface, but it seems to be confirmed by a passage where Livy clearly delivers a polemic against such alternative views on the Roman past.

25) Vassiliades 2020, 114–131, 609–629. Balmaceda 2017, 84 ff. points out that Livy's understanding of the Roman past as a blend of continuity and change is what leads him to prefer early Roman history to recent history, which was the material chosen by his predecessor Sallust, because this material was more apt to provide *exempla* for slowing down Rome's course to decadence. See on the latter point Liv. praef. 10.

26) Vassiliades 2020, 107–114. On the way the Sallustian scheme of decline, especially in the monographs, is refuted in Livy's preface, cf. Ogilvie 1965, 24, 29; Manzo 1991, 290; Moles 1993, 155–156; Balmaceda 2017, 88–89. Contra Leeman 1961, 31; Oppermann [1955] 1967, 178; Paschalis 1980, 138–140, 148–149, argue that Sallustian reminiscences in this passage reflect Livy's adherence to the theory of his predecessor.

27) See Sal. Hist. fr. 1.11 Maurenbrecher = 9–10 Ramsey = 1.15 La Penna-Furnari.

In Book 26, Livy refers to the election of the consuls in 210 B. C., during the Second Punic War. The century of the younger men of the Voturia tribe, who had the right to vote first, declared in favour of T. Manlius Torquatus. The general did not accept this result, asserting that his blindness would not allow him to be the leader of such an important war. Despite the crowd's persistence, the prestige of the old man compelled the centuries to vote for other consuls. As a conclusion to this episode, Livy seizes the opportunity to stress that the creation of an ideal State is not realistic, because of the natural *cupiditas* of both the leaders and the people, but that the ancient Roman *res publica* should be considered an exception to this rule:

Eludant nunc antiqua mirantes: non equidem, si qua sit sapientium civitas quam docti fingunt magis quam norunt, aut principes grauiores temperantioresque a cupidine imperii aut multitudinem melius moratam censeam fieri posse. 15. Centuriam uero iuniorum seniores consulere uoluisse quibus imperium suffragio mandaret, uix ut ueri simile sit parentium quoque hoc saeculo uilis leuisque apud liberos auctoritas fecit.

(Liv. 26.22.14–15)

Let men now make sport of those who admire what is old. For my part, if there should be a city-state of sages, such as philosophers imagine rather than actually know, I am inclined to think that neither could leading men possibly be of more solid worth and more self-controlled as regards the lust for power, nor could the populace show a higher character. 15. But that a century of the younger men wished to confer with their elders on the question to which persons they should, by their vote, entrust a high command, should seem to us scarcely credible – this is due to the cheapened and diminished authority even of parents over their children in our day.

(Transl. F. G. Moore [LOEB 1970]).

The opening phrase of Livy's parenthetical comment (*eludant nunc antiqua mirantes*) is clearly a polemical one. Since Livy distinguishes between the active and passive forms of the verb *eludo*,²⁸ the verb *eludant* should be considered an active form and the present participle *mirantes* should be taken as the object of the verb. The subject of *eludant* is indefinite and could be rendered by an indefinite pronoun. It follows that by this phrase, Livy criticises a

28) See Liv. 6.41.8 (*eludant* [sc. *ipsi*] *nunc religiones*); 26.19.8 (*his miraculis nunquam ab ipso elusa fides est*).

prominent trend which consists in underestimating the importance of the Roman past as a source of moral lessons still relevant to the present.²⁹ The following lines point to the idea that the two contradictory attitudes towards the Roman past derive from two different conceptions of Rome's moral history.

Livy's stance, which reflects the views of the admirers of the past, needs to be first clarified. When the historian denies that a city with more solid worth and more self-controlled leaders and people endowed with better moral standards (*multitudinem melius moratam*) could exist, he does not imply that all cities are doomed to be destroyed by discord and moral decline.³⁰ The ideal city of philosophers (*sapientium ciuitas*) is not compared with any real city, but solely with the ancient *res publica*, which is considered superior not only to the contemporary *res publica*, but also to the ideal city of philosophers. By adopting this standpoint, Livy distinguishes himself from philosophers like Plato who try to fabricate imaginary ideal cities, instead of looking towards the examples of virtues incarnated by real cities. Livy's position is similar to the Ciceronian attitude towards the ancient *res publica* which Cicero adopts as an ideal model of State, instead of fabricating an ideal city.³¹

To sum up, Livy, along with other admirers of the past, views early Rome as a morally exceptional city. This moral and political greatness of their city could have been preserved, had Romans not chosen to abandon the model relationship between leaders and people presented in this episode. In the second part of the passage (*centuriam ... auctoritas fecit*), Livy deplors the actual decadence of Roman *mores*, which does not allow contemporary people to believe (*uix ut ueri simile*) that such a *modus operandi* between leaders and people has ever been possible. Nevertheless, those who do not acknowledge the high moral standards of the ancient *res publica* seem to be unaware of the decline of the current *res publica*. Livy thus alludes to a different view of Roman moral history.

29) Livy adopts a similar defensive line in favour of his choice to focus on ancient Roman history (Liv. praef. 4–7) and to include portents in his work (Liv. 43.13.1–2). On Livy's defence of *antiquitas* in these passages, see Mazza 1967, 93–96; Luce 1977, 248–249; Miles 1995, 18; Fabrizi 2017, 99–102, 106–107.

30) Cf. Steffensen 2009, 122.

31) See Cic. Rep. 1.46.70, 2.1.3, 2.11.21–22; De or. 1.53.230. See also Novara 1982, 272–280; Meyerhoefer 1987.

By delivering this decline discourse, Livy points out that the decadence of the *res publica* is not just a moralistic interpretation of history, but a historical reality, based on source evidence. Livian decline discourse is directed to an anti-decline discourse which was also present in Rome when Livy is writing these lines around 20 B. C. The historian polemically alludes to the partisans of these anti-decadence theories at the beginning of the digression: *eludant nunc antiqua mirantes*. In this context, the adverb *nunc* could refer not only to the actual moment of the narration, but mainly to Livy's own age. The phrase *eludant nunc antiqua mirantes* targets those Romans who are sarcastic towards the admiration of the past, which arises from the conviction that Rome is in decline. By contrast, those who challenge the validity of the decadence scheme necessarily reach the conclusion that the past should not be admired, as if it were superior to the present.

This sceptical ideological stance can be clearly detected in two Augustan poetic texts published some years later, which, although commented by scholars, have not been interpreted as a pendant to the prominent decline discourse of the Augustan age. In both texts, anti-decadence ideas are expressed in the context of an explicit or implicit communication of poets with the prince, within which they comment on the moral discourse of the regime and the people.

In the case of Horace's Ep. 2.1, the poet enters into direct dialogue with the prince. According to Suetonius, Augustus so highly appreciated the poet's writings that, after having read some of his *Sermones*, he expressed his 'anger' to Horace (*irasci me tibi scito*), because the poet did not choose to talk to him and foremost.³² Suetonius considers Ep. 2.1 to be an answer to these complaints: Horace opens the poem with an apostrophe to Augustus, where he declares that he would sin against the public weal, if he delayed

32) Suet. Vita Hor. 10–11. Fraenkel 1957, 383; Putnam 1986, 22; Oliensis 1998, 11, and Günther 2010, 17–20, insist on the playful and familiar character of the letter. Freudenburg 2014, 113–116, asserts that the 'anger' expressed was all feigned. More generally on the much-debated subject of Horace's relationship with Augustus, as reflected throughout the poet's work, see among others Fraenkel 1957, 239–297, 364–399; La Penna 1963; Doblhofer 1966; idem 1981; Brink 1982, 523–525; Santirocco 1995; Mutschler 2011, 36–42; Hollard 2016; and especially Lowrie 2007, with previous bibliography.

with long talk (*longo sermone*) the busy hours of the *princeps*, dedicated to the reform of *mores* and *leges* (Ep. 2.1.1–4). The praise continues in the following verses, where Augustus is compared with Roman and Greek demigods: unlike the latter, whose benefits have only been recognised after their death, Augustus' services are acknowledged in his lifetime (Ep. 2.1.5–17). This introduction prepares Horace's complaints against the double standards practised by Romans. Whereas they acknowledge the merits of a contemporary leader like Augustus, they tend to be quite sceptical towards contemporary artistic creation. By dealing with evolution in politics and literature together, Horace shows that, in his perspective, change in literature may be paralleled with change in politics:

*Sed tuus hic populus sapiens et iustus in uno
te nostris ducibus, te Graeis anteferendo
cetera nequaquam simili ratione modoque* 20
*aestimat et, nisi quae terris semota suisque
temporibus defuncta uidet, fastidit et odit;
sic fautor ueterum ut tabulas peccare uetantis,
quas bis quinque uiri sanxerunt, foedera regum* 25
*uel Gabius uel cum rigidis aequata Sabinis,
pontificum libros, annosa uolumina uatum
dictitet Albano Musas in monte locutas.
Si, quia Graiorum sunt antiquissima quaeque
scripta uel optima, Romani pensantur eadem
scriptores trutina, non est quod multa loquamur.*

(Hor. Ep. 2.1.18–30)

Yet this people of yours, so wise and just in one respect, in ranking you above our own, above Greek leaders, judges all other things by a wholly different rule and method, and scorns and detests all save what it sees has passed from earth and lived its days. So strong is its bias toward things ancient, that the Tables forbidding transgression, which the ten men enacted, treaties in which our kings made equal terms with Gabii or the sturdy Sabines, the Pontiff's records, the mouldy scrolls of seers – these, it tells us over and over, were spoken by the Muses of the Alban mount. If, because among Greek writings the oldest are quite the best, we are to weigh Roman writers in the same balance, there is no need of many words.

(Transl. H. Rushton Fairclough [LOEB 1926],
as well as all translations of the Ep. 2.1)

Horace attempts throughout the poem to refute the Roman obsession with the past, by giving concrete examples from Roman literature proving that older poets are far from perfect and that new writers should not be depreciated.³³ The dichotomy between old and new is one of the themes which give the poem its coherence.³⁴ The whole poem appears, then, to be an anti-decline manifesto, a refutation of the interpretation of the history of literature in terms of decline. The latter conception is depicted as an innate characteristic of the Roman people, which operates as an obstacle to progress. It should be underlined that Horace does not classify the decadence-concept among universal ideas applicable to all mankind. On the contrary, he stresses that the Greeks did not share the same idea; it was precisely their openness to new ideas that allowed their literature to progress:

*Quodsi tam Graecis nouitas inuisa fuisset
quam nobis, quid nunc esset uetus? Aut quid haberet
quod legeret tereretque uiritim publicus usus?*

(Hor. Ep. 2.1.90–92)

But if novelty had been as offensive to the Greeks as it is to us, what in these days would be ancient? What would the public have to read and thumb, each according to his taste?

Horace undermines the decadence theory to which the Romans were so dearly attached, asserting that it is not an idea shared by all mankind. Instead of being interpreted in terms of decline, the evolution of time is understood as the result of progressive development.³⁵ In other words, according to Horace, time makes things better rather than worse.³⁶ His progressive conception of the re-

33) See Hor. Ep. 50–89, 139–176. Rocchi 2017, demonstrated that throughout the poem, Horace portrays Antiquity in a negative way, as a disvalue, and presents himself as a champion of the present and the moderns.

34) See on this Glinatsis 2012.

35) See Citroni 2013, for a detailed discussion on Horace's analysis of the history of Latin literature as inscribed in a process of progressive development.

36) This concept of time is in direct opposition to that advocated by the poet in Hor. Carm. 3.6.45–48. Cf. also Hor. Epod. 16.63–67 for the theory of Golden Age.

lationship between past and present reveals itself in the positive evaluation of the influence of Greek on Roman theatre:

*Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artes
intulit agresti Latio; sic horridus ille
defluxit numerus Saturnius, et graue uirus
munditiae pepulere; sed in longum tamen aeuum
manserunt hodieque manent uestigia ruris.*

(Hor. Ep. 2.1.156–160)

Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium. Then the stream of that rude Saturnian measure ran dry and good taste banished the offensive poison; yet for many a year lived on, and still live on, traces of our rustic past.

Horace interprets the history of Roman poetry in terms of progress; he is, of course, far from sharing the opinions of traditionalists like Cato who, since the early 2nd century B. C., had regarded Greek influence as a sign of moral degeneration.³⁷ Decadence discourse is thus questioned in this poem and replaced by an anti-decadence and progress discourse.

One might be tempted to conclude that Horace's anti-decadence discourse applies solely to a literary context and not to the political sphere. As stated in v. 18–19, cited above, Romans acknowledge Augustus as superior to leaders of the past. However, a careful reading of the following lines might reveal an aspect which has not been emphasised even by scholars who insist on the obvious political implications of a poem addressed to Augustus.³⁸ Gradually shifting from politics to literature and mixing both perspectives, Horace shows there that the obsession of the Roman people with the past also applies to the way they evaluate political texts and institutions (v. 20–27): the Twelve Tables, the treaties of Roman kings and the Pontiff's records are considered to have been spoken by the Muses.

37) Brink 1982, ad loc. On Cato's struggle against foreign influence, see Liv. 34.2–4, 39.44.2–4; Plu. Cat. Mai. 8.2, 18.2–3, 19.4; Polyb. 31.25.5; Diod. Sic. 37.3.5–6. See also Biesinger 2016, 59–92, on the Catonian decadence discourse.

38) Feeney 2002, shows that Horace attempts to create an analogy between the ageing *princeps* after the death of Agrippa and himself, the ageing poet after the death of Virgil and others.

This ironic statement might have quite a strong effect on Augustus, if one takes into account the attempts of resistance against the prince's regime, revealed some years before the publication of the Epistle around 12–8 B. C.³⁹ The conspiracies of Murena and Fannius Caepion and of Egnatius Rufus against Augustus had been suppressed in 23/22 and 20/19 B. C. respectively.⁴⁰ In 18 B. C., his attempt to reform legislation on marriage and adultery, thus asserting that he would struggle against moral degeneration and restore ancestral morals, had been vividly contested.⁴¹ It follows that Augustus' effort to grace Italy with morals and to reform her with laws, to which Horace refers in the opening lines of the poem,⁴² was not an easy one, despite the traditionalist self-portraying of the regime as a restoration of the *res publica*. The image of a unanimous acceptance of the regime might thus be ironic. The *princeps* himself implicitly appears as a victim of the Roman obsession with the past and the attachment of people to the interpretation of history in terms of decline, which he had exploited himself, by claiming to revive old-fashioned morals and old-fashioned *pietas*.

It is important to bear in mind that the Epistle takes the form of a *recusatio* which is explicitly expressed at the end of the poem: Horace politely refuses the challenge to write a poem singing his exploits, by stating that Augustus is worthy of a greater poet than he is.⁴³ The poet is aware of the dangers of literature as gift exchange and wants to leave himself out of the poets patronised by

39) On the dating of Ep. 2.1, see Brink 1982, 552–553; Harrison 2014, 66–67. Cf. Anna 1983, who dates it to 19 B. C.

40) See Vell. Pat. 2.91; Suet. Aug. 19; Cass. Dio 53.24, 54.3; Sen. Clem. 37.6; and Cogitore 2002, 122–141.

41) See Suet. Aug. 34; Cass. Dio 54.16, 56.1–4.

42) Hor. Ep. 2.1.2–3.

43) See Hor. Ep. 2.1.250–270; cf. Freudenburg 2014, 113–116, who suggests that all Augustus had asked for was a friendly letter (*sermo*), in order to show the public that he was no autocrat; Augustus “writes to him the way he would like to be written back to, exactly the way he had seen Horace write to so many others, as one needling old chum to another”. It must be clarified, however, that Horace's *recusatio* does not primarily concern the undertaking of such a letter, which he actually writes to the emperor through Ep. 2.1 (see Freudenburg 2014, 128), but the composition of a longer poem relating the story of great exploits. See Hor. Ep. 2.1.250–259. Cf. Günther 2013, 494–495, who doubts that Horace is responding to a specific request of Augustus to write epic poetry.

Augustus.⁴⁴ Horace's *recusatio* needs to be undertaken in a tactful⁴⁵ and convincing way, in order to appease the emperor's eventual displeasure.⁴⁶ A clear reference to the Romans' abhorrence of the regime would probably sound politically incorrect.⁴⁷ On the contrary, by lamenting the Romans' irrational attachment to the past, Horace not only shows the difficulty of the task demanded by the prince, but also manages to establish an undercover bond between himself and Augustus: both are victims of the Roman obsession with decadence. Anti-decline discourse is used as a means of expressing sympathy to Augustus and declining the prince's demands to write poetry in his honour.

Anti-decadence discourse is also used in Book 3 of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* as engaging in a political discussion regarding the Augustan conception of the past. Nevertheless, contrary to the case of Horace's Ep. 2.1, Ovid's dialogue with the values promoted by the regime is not undertaken in the context of a direct communication between the poet and the prince, but by means of critical allusions by Ovid to some important axes of Augustan traditionalism. Scholars tend to insist on the rather sceptical reception of Augustus' ide-

44) See Oliensis 1998, 191–197. According to Lowrie 2007, 88–89, Horace's stance in Ep. 2.1 recalls his final lyrics (Carm. 4.14.11–12): "Horace's final words to Augustus in both genres are the culmination of a lifetime's attempt to represent a man whose singular position made him an aesthetic challenge. Horace offers praise at the same time as he maintains a position of independence that renders his praise all the more valuable." On Horace's conception of patronage as reflected in Ep. 2.1, see Bowditch 2001, 31–38.

45) On Horace's tact, see also Fraenkel 1957, 399.

46) See Suet. Vita Hor. 11: in his letter, Augustus expressed his anger with Horace (*irasci me tibi scito*) for finding no mention of himself in his *sermones*. Scholars have insisted on the playful aspect of the 'anger' expressed in this letter (see supra, n. 27). It cannot, however, be ascertained that Horace drew the same conclusion from Augustus' letter, and – much less – that he would ignore the risk of provoking the emperor's real anger.

47) If one follows the analysis of Freudenburg 2014, 115–119, Horace's political cautiousness is also reflected in the satirical way in which the poet's *recusatio* is informed by the denials of political honours performed by Augustus: the similarities linking the honours of Augustus lauded at the beginning of the poem (Hor. Ep. 2.1.1–17) to those rejected by the poet at the end underscore the contrast between the emperor's acceptance of weighty honours after 13 B.C. and the poet's refusal to take them on.

ology by Ovid,⁴⁸ but without investigating how this critical stance is reflected in the development of an alternative general vision of the relationship between past and present.

This theory is clearly articulated in Book 3 of the *Ars Amatoria*. The poet exhorts Roman women, especially those who lack beauty, to cultivate their bodies; modern women should not follow the example of older women like Andromache, whose lovers were not so cultivated (v. 101–112). Ovid then opens a digression in order to evaluate the different cultural context between olden times and the Rome of his days:

*Simplicitas rudis ante fuit: nunc aurea Roma est,
et domiti magnas possidet orbis opes.
Aspice quae nunc sunt Capitolia, quaeque fuerunt: 115
alterius dices illa fuisse Iouis.
Curia, concilio quae nunc dignissima tanto,
de stipula Tatio regna tenente fuit.
Quae nunc sub Phoebō ducibusque Palatia fulgent,
quid nisi araturis pascua bubus erant? 120
Prisca inuent alios: ego me nunc denique natum
gratulor: haec aetas moribus apta meis.
Non quia nunc terrae lentum subducitur aurum,
lectaque diuerso litore concha uenit:
Nec quia decrescunt effosso marmore montes, 125
nec quia caeruleae mole fugantur aquae:
sed quia cultus adest, nec nostros mansit in annos
rusticitas, priscis illa superstes auis.*

(Ov. Ars 3.113–128)

There was rude simplicity of old, but now golden Rome possesses the vast wealth of the conquered world. See what the Capitol is now, and what it was: you would say they belonged to different Jupiters. The

48) Cf. Kennedy 1992, who has argued that no text can be labelled pro- or anti-Augustan, since such interpretations are only drawn from the audience's reception. Davis 2006, questions Kennedy's "subjectivism" (ibid. 9–22), and analyses Ovid's works as a critique of the Augustan version of what it was to be Roman. In line with Kennedy's approach, Williams 2009, suggests that Ovid's works reveal "an intimate engagement" with Augustan discourse, whose values are persistently challenged. See also along the same lines Mutschler 2011, 43–52.

senate-house, which now is most worthy of so august a gathering, was, when Tatiüs held sway, made of wattles. The Palatine whereon now Phoebus and our chieftains are set in splendour, what was it save the pasture of oxen destined to the plough? Let ancient times delight other folk: I congratulate myself that I was not born till now; this age fits my nature well. Not because now stubborn gold is drawn from out the earth, and shells come gathered from divers shores, nor because mountains diminish as the marble is dug from them, nor because masonry puts to flight the dark-blue waters; but because culture is with us, and rusticity, which survived until our grandsires, has not lasted to our days.

(Transl. J. H. Mozley / G. P. Goold [LOEB 1929],
as well as all translations of the *Arts*)

By defending the refined culture of his own times against ancient rusticity, Ovid delivers a striking and polemical anti-decline discourse, which is often taken to simply reflect his critical stance towards the moralism of the Augustan regime.⁴⁹ These verses were composed around 2 B. C. at the earliest⁵⁰ or as late as 8 A. D.⁵¹ In any case, by this time, Augustan moral policy had already been expressed through the *leges Iuliae* on marriage and adultery and through the exile of the prince's daughter Julia around 2 B. C. Only two scholars comment on Ovid's own conception of the past in this passage. Watson insists on the playful aspect of the digression, whose conclusions should not thus be taken as a genuine philosophical statement.⁵² By contrast, Mader reads the passage as a polemical statement against the previous moralistic, especially elegiac, tradition to which Ovid alludes throughout the text.⁵³ The present analysis will attempt to bridge these two opposite readings of the text, by showing that Ovid articulates a forthright anti-decline discourse opposed to Augustan moralistic ideology, but he does not intend to refuse decline as a historical reality. Ovid provides a more nuanced view of decadence, according to which decline in some

49) See e.g. Fränkel 1945, 64–65; Williams 1978, 63; Morgan 1977, 30. Edwards 1993, 18–19, only talks of a “subversion of the vocabulary of traditional Roman moralising”.

50) See Williams 1978, 70–83.

51) See Murgia 1986.

52) Watson 1982.

53) Mader 1988.

aspects could occur simultaneously with progress in others. It will be pointed out that the poet's relativistic standpoint undermines the Augustan use of decline discourse by subtly revealing its ideological contradictions.

The opening verse contains an allusion to Augustan policy, which more or less determines the interpretation of the whole digression. The use of the adjective *aurea* hints at the metaphorical ideological self-portrayal of the Augustan regime as the return of a primitive Golden Age (*aurea aetas*), promoted by Augustan poetry, especially Virgil.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the next verse (v. 114) shows that *aurea* literally refers to the wealth brought to Rome by the conquests, which wealth has been used by Augustus for the embellishment of the city. Ovid then focuses in more detail on Augustus' construction policy (v. 115–120). The *aurea templa* and *Capitolia* also impress Virgil, Propertius and Ovid himself in the *Fasti*,⁵⁵ but Ovid here seems to attribute a totally different meaning to the adjective *aurea*. First, contrary to those Augustan poets, Ovid is no longer nostalgic of the primitive past, the *aurea aetas*,⁵⁶ which represents in Ovid an era of rude rusticity. Furthermore, the Ovidian *aurea aetas* is no longer the blessed age of innocence, but the century in which gold reigns. According to Bonjour, by this striking difference Ovid demystifies the sacred character of the Augustan regime in Virgil, where it is presented as a return of the Golden Age (*aurea saecula*).⁵⁷ It could thus be concluded that Ovid also admires the Augustan regime which he also considers an *aurea aetas*, an era of progress, but for humbler reasons than Virgil. Ovid tries to dispel this impression in the following verses.

On the one hand, the poet's emphatic statement (v. 121–122) that he congratulates himself on being born nowadays and not in ancient times, and that this era is the best adapted to his character (*mores*) can be read as irony towards the traditionalistic ideology of the regime and those who support the moral reforms promoted by Augustus. The prince and his partisans could be the *alii* targeted

54) See Verg. Aen. 6.792–793.

55) See Verg. Aen. 8.347–348; Prop. 4.1.5; Ov. Fast. 1.223–224.

56) See Mader 1988, 373–375. In this respect, Ovid reverses Hesiod's analysis of the Golden Age (Hes. Op. 174–201). See Gibson 2003, ad loc.

57) See Verg. Aen. 6.792–793; Bonjour 1980, 222–223.

in v. 121, who prefer the old times (*Prisca iuuent alios*).⁵⁸ The traditionalistic ideology of Augustus may be considered an attachment to the rude simplicity (*simplicitas rudis, rusticitas*), characteristic of other ages (v. 113, 128). Ovid's digression conveys the idea that things – and *mores* – naturally progress and one cannot and should not remain stuck in the past.⁵⁹

On the other hand, in v. 123–128, Ovid makes clear that the reason he is fond of his era is not the profusion of gold but the development of *cultus*. The poet thus shows that he cannot be found guilty of greed.⁶⁰ The latter characteristic may be indirectly attributed to Augustus who is most probably the one who draws gold out of the earth and digs marble from the mountains in order to embellish the city.⁶¹ The reference to marble might render the allusion more recognisable, by pointing to a slogan of Augustan construction policy: according to Suetonius, Augustus could justly boast that he had found a city built of brick (*latericiam*) and left it in marble (*marmoream*).⁶² Ovid artfully turns a slogan of pride into a source of embarrassment for Augustus.

The poet's fondness for contemporary times and *mores* might sound contradictory to the condemnation of greed. Ovid clarifies the contradiction, by explaining that decline in some aspects can take place at the same time as progress in others: the development of *cultus*, which is a sign of progress, is accompanied by the development of greed, which is a symptom of decadence. The

58) According to Gibson 2003, ad loc. and ad 113, *alios* may refer to Virgil (Aen. 8.98–100, 347 ff., 359 ff.), Tibullus (2.5.23–38, 55–60) and Propertius (4.1.1–38, 4.2.1–10, 4.4.1–14; 4.9), who also compare the ancient and modern cities. However, contrary to Ovid who states his preference for the modern and beautified Rome, the older poets “create a ‘double image’, whereby the modern city is superimposed on the ancient site”. Williams 2009, 210, notes that while other poets emphasize continuity between Rome's pristine values, preserved and now enhanced by Augustus, Ovid stresses the separation of old from new.

59) See Ov. Medic. 11–26 for the same idea.

60) Mader 1988, 373–375, reads these verses as a polemic reply by Ovid, who anticipates the accusations of Roman moralists, especially elegiac poets. For this reason, several *topoi* used in this passage are reminiscent of this tradition.

61) Gibson 2003, ad loc., explains that the noun *aurum* recalls the prominent *aurea Roma* (v. 113).

62) Suet. Aug. 28.3; Mon. Anc. 19–21. Brunelle 2015, ad loc., also refers to Ov. Ars 3.317 (*marmoreis theatris*).

contradiction from the poet's perspective is solved, but the tension between the lack of *cultus* and the development of greed ironically points to the double standards inherent in the Augustan policy: the prince gathers gold and marble from around the world in order to embellish the city, but, at the same time, he remains stuck in a retrograde policy which tends to exclude *cultus*. Suetonius reports that Augustus used to live in a modest dwelling of Hortensius, that was remarkable neither for size nor elegance (*neque laxitate neque cultu conspicuis*).⁶³

Augustus' sceptical attitude towards feminine *cultus* seems to have also been reflected in the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*, through which the prince attempted to restrain female sexual license, considered as a cause of the republic's breakdown.⁶⁴ According to McGinn, in this law Roman women were symbolically divided into two categories: a) prostitutes and *lenae* and b) *matres familias*. Prostitutes should wear a *toga*, whereas the *stola* and *palla* were reserved for honourable women. A woman convicted of adultery should wear a *toga*, in order to be publicly humiliated.⁶⁵ Gibson⁶⁶ has argued that the provision of the law creates an aesthetic polarity between two types of women, which Ovid tries to subvert, by replacing it with an aesthetic intermediate model of woman who is fond of *cultus*, but avoiding exaggerations:

*Vos quoque nec caris aures onerate lapillis,
quos legit in uiridi decolor Indus aqua, 130
nec prodite graues insuto uestibus auro,
per quas nos petitis, saepe fugatis, opes.*

(Ov. Ars 3.129–132)

You too burden not your ears with precious stones, which the discoloured Indian gathers from the green water, and come not forth weighed down with the gold sewn upon your garments; the wealth wherewith you seek us oftentimes repels.

63) Suet. Aug. 72.1.

64) See on this point Edwards 1993, 42–47.

65) McGinn 1998, 147–156, 194–203.

66) Gibson 2006, 136–142. On the relationship between the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Leges Iuliae*, see also idem 2003, 30–32; Davis 2006, 85–95.

It has been demonstrated that Ovid adopts here an intermediate and moderate conception of *cultus* which is at odds not only with the long anti-cosmetic tradition during Antiquity, but also with the earliest Augustan elegiac tradition (particularly Propertius 1.2) which accepts only natural beauty without any adornment.⁶⁷ The poet opposes moderation as a weapon against the polarities of Augustan ideology which also characterised Octavian's life to some extent.⁶⁸

The same moderation applies to Ovid's interpretation of past and present: contrary to the prince and his partisans, one should neither idealise all aspects of the past, like the limited role of *cultus*, nor have a selectively positive attitude towards some decadent forces of the present, such as excessive wealth. The poet shows that he is fond of the *cultus* of Rome, mainly possible due to Augustus, but under the same conditions under which he approves of the *cultus* of women:⁶⁹ in both cases, exaggerations should be avoided. The adornment of Rome with gold, read together with the reference to the greed of people drawing gold out of the earth, remind Augustus' inability to show moderation in this respect, especially given that moralising attacks against luxurious building were very common in Rome.⁷⁰

Ovid describes Augustus' greed as a feature inherent in human nature, which however becomes a symptom of decadence, since it keeps increasing with time. This idea is illustrated by the poet in the *Fasti*, where Janus, instead of advertising, like Hesiod, the purity of the Golden age,⁷¹ declares that even during Saturn's reign he hardly saw a man who was not fond of lucre; at the same time, the god makes also clear that as time went on, the love of possession (*amor*

67) See Gibson 2006, 123–136 (esp. 132–136); Watson 1982, 238–239; Mader 1988, 366–367.

68) On Ovid's moderation see Gibson 2006, 136–142. The following are among the contradictions characterising the Augustan regime, which Galinsky 1996, 370–375, draws from various sources: the coexistence of republican and monarchic forms of government; his conversion to a clement *pater patriae* after having been possessed by bloodthirst; his adulteries, despite his attachment to the traditional values of family and marriage.

69) See on this point Bonjour 1980, 224.

70) For a detailed account see Edwards 1993, 137–172.

71) Cf. Hes. Op. 109–121.

habendi) grew until now, where it can scarcely go farther (*nunc est summus*).⁷² The use of *nunc* might be read as a critical hint of the greed of the Augustan era, especially if one accepts the opinion that Augustan ideology and discourse are often implicitly challenged through the choices of narrative form and content throughout the poem.⁷³ Furthermore, as Barchiesi pointed out, Ovid's omission of the most important political myth of the early Augustan age, that of the Return of the *aurea aetas*,⁷⁴ makes Janus' scheme discordant with Augustan discourse.⁷⁵

Yet, despite adopting a sceptical attitude against contemporary greed, Ovid has Janus underline that gold gives a better omen (*melius nunc omen in auro est*) and that gods are also tickled by golden temples, although they approve of the ancient ones as well (*nos quoque templa iuuant, quamuis antiqua probemus, aurea*).⁷⁶ As noted by Barchiesi, Ovid "suggests an acceptance of the present that makes the utopia of the Return a hypocritical fantasy".⁷⁷ Moreover, as stressed by Green, the double standards exposed in Janus' speech may also reflect the tension in Augustan discourse between pride in the splendour of contemporary Rome and respect for primitive Roman values.⁷⁸ The conclusion of Ovid-Janus in the *Fasti* suggests, however, an alternative approach to past and present, which tends to overcome the incongruities inherent in Augustan

72) See Ov. *Fast.* 1.191–195, with Bonjour 1980, 224–225.

73) See Barchiesi 1997, for this interpretation of Ovid's stance towards Augustus in the *Fasti*. See also Williams 2009, 210–216, with updated bibliography. It should not be concluded, however, that Ovid's *Fasti* are necessarily "anti-Augustan". As noted by Newlands 1995, 6 ff., the poem is neither a panegyric nor a critique of the imperial system, but it does offer a form of resistance to Augustus' appropriation of Roman culture. Pasco-Pranger 2006, 21–72, shows that Ovid's account tends to reveal the ideological manipulation of the calendar by Augustus, but, at the same time, he treats the calendar as a basic instrument of social and political stability. Cf. Herbert-Brown 1994, who reads the *Fasti* as a poem with encomiastic purpose.

74) Cf. Hes. *Op.* 174–175; Verg. *Ecl.* 4.4–5; Aen. 6.792–794. Cf. also Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*.

75) Barchiesi 1997, 229–237.

76) See Ov. *Fast.* 1.221–224.

77) Barchiesi 1997, 237; cf. Pasco-Pranger 2006, 40–41, who suggests that by accepting both the present and the past, Ovid expresses a thoroughly Augustan idea: Augustus (*Mon. Anc.* 8.5), too, acknowledged that he was using "new laws" to restore the *mos maiorum*, but also claimed to be renewing old *exempla*.

78) Green 2004, 98.

discourse⁷⁹ and seems perfectly applicable to the conception of decadence in the *Ars Amatoria*:

*laudamus ueteres, sed nostris utimur annis:
mos tamen est aequae dignus uterque coli.*

(Ov. Fast. 1.225–226)

We praise the past, but use the present years; yet are both customs worthy to be kept.

(Transl. J. G. Frazer [LOEB 1931]).

Ovid's anti-decline discourse in the *Ars Amatoria* and in the *Fasti* does not aim to totally reject the reality of decadence, but to articulate a strongly political message according to which the decadence scheme is not necessarily applicable to all aspects of human life. Like Horace, Ovid uses anti-decadence discourse in order to make a political comment on the Augustan regime. However, Ovid's anti-decline rhetoric has the reverse effect: instead of establishing, like Horace, a dialogue with the prince whose policy is approved, in contrast to the Roman people obsessed with the past, Ovid implicitly exposes the inconsistencies of the regime's decline rhetoric.

Anti-decadence theories in Augustan Rome were closely linked to the political realities of the newly established *principatus* with which writers intended to establish an undercover dialogue, expressing their views on the ideological orientation of the regime. The political dimension is also predominant in Latin literature of the Early Empire, but the questioning of decline theories seems to answer different social and ideological needs.

79) Green 2004, ad loc., also remarks that Janus finishes with “conciliatory advice”, but the contradictions of Janus' earlier comments cannot be easily reconciled.

*Anti-decadence discourse in the Latin literature
of the Early Empire: from politics towards meta-reflection
on the decline theory*

The main distinguishing feature of anti-decadence theories during the first century A.D. is that they do not conceive of decline theories as just a Roman obsession, but as a universal *idée fixe*. This observation creates the conditions for the development of a meta-reflection on decadence, which is apparent in Seneca and Tacitus. Two passages in Seneca, which have not gained much attention from scholars⁸⁰ reflect this new orientation of anti-decadence theories: § 1.10 of *De Beneficiis* and Ep. ad Lucil. 97.

In Ben. 1.7–9, Seneca tries to demonstrate that it is not the size of our respective benefits, but the character of the one from whom they originate that should be our concern.⁸¹ Contrary to this principle, in Seneca's society a man is considered crafty (*callidus*) if he does not make himself difficult of access to those who come with immoderate desires: a man who is not willing to surrender his wife to others is detestable to other men and women, and adultery has become the most appropriate sort of betrothal.⁸² Seneca then makes a digression on the moral degeneration of his era: greed, injustice, violence and plunder of provinces are among the vices which characterise modern society.⁸³ This account creates the fallacious impression that Seneca, in line with Roman moralists, is delivering a decline discourse. The following paragraph reverses this expectation, since Seneca states that the feeling of decadence is eternal, not because decadence is a reality, but because human faults are not only observed in this generation (*nostro saeculo*) but are always present:

80) Griffin [1976] 1992, 183; idem 2013, 59, 183–184, comments in passing on Ben. 1.10, and only observes that Seneca rejects the popular idea of decline in the passage of *De beneficiis*. Ep. 97 is not included in the recent commentary of Inwood 2007.

81) On Seneca's social, political and philosophical thought and his conception of *beneficia* in *De beneficiis*, see Chaumartin 1989, 1702–1723; Inwood 1995 = 2005, 65–94; Griffin 2002; idem 2003; idem 2013, 5–87; Lentano 2005; idem 2009. See also the bibliographical review presented by Lentano 2014, 202–204.

82) Sen. Ben. 1.9.2–4.

83) Sen. Ben. 1.9.5.

Sed longius nos impetus euehit prouocante materia; itaque sic finiamus, ne in nostro saeculo culpa subsidat. Hoc maiores nostri questi sunt, hoc nos querimus, hoc posteri nostri querentur, euersos mores, regnare nequitiam, in deterius res humanas et omne nefas labi; at ista eodem stant loco stabuntque paulum dumtaxat ultra aut citra mota, ut fluctus, quos aestus accedens longius extulit, recedens interiore litorum uestigio tenuit.

(Sen. Ben. 1.10.1)

But, because the subject is alluring, my ardour has carried me too far; and so let me close by showing that it is not our generation only that is beset by this fault. The complaint our ancestors made, the complaint we make, the complaint our posterity will make, is that morality is overturned, that wickedness holds sway, and that human affairs and every sin are tending toward the worse. Yet these things remain and will continue to remain in the same position, with only a slight movement now in this direction, now in that, like that of the waves, which a rising tide carries far inland, and a receding tide restrains within the limits of the shoreline.

(Transl. J. W. Basore [LOEB 1935],
as well as all translations of *De beneficiis*)

Since vices exist in all eras, the decline idea cannot be accurate. The notion of decadence assumes the existence of an ideal state of reference, which is lacking according to Seneca. The philosopher articulates a strong anti-decadence manifesto which will be further elucidated, as we will see, in the next few lines (Ben. 1.10.2–3). The same standpoint is even more emphatically adopted by Seneca at the beginning of Ep. ad. Lucil. 97:

Erras, mi Lucili, si existimas nostri saeculi esse uitium luxuriam et neglegentiam boni moris et alia, quae obiecit suis quisque temporibus; hominum sunt ista, non temporum. Nulla aetas uacauit a culpa. Et si aestimare licentiam cuiusque saeculi incipias, pudet dicere, numquam apertius quam coram Catone peccatum est.

(Sen. Ep. 97.1)

You are mistaken, my dear Lucilius, if you think that luxury, neglect of good manners, and other vices of which each man accuses the age in which he lives, are especially characteristic of our own epoch; no, they are the vices of mankind and not of the times. No era in history has ever been free from blame. Moreover, if you once begin to take account of the irregularities belonging to any particular era, you will find – to man's shame be it spoken – that sin never stalked abroad more openly than in Cato's very presence.

(Transl. R. M. Gummere [LOEB 1925],
as well as all translations of the *Epistulae* of Seneca)

Seneca underlines that no era has ever been free from vices, even in the presence of individuals of exceptional moral standards. By pointing to the absence of an ideal state of reference, Seneca shows that the conception of moral history in terms of decline is unfounded. In the next few lines, Seneca invokes, in support of his theory, the example of the acquittal of Clodius, accused of secret adultery with Caesar's wife: Clodius was acquitted because the judges were bribed and despite the fact that Cato gave evidence at the trial. Seneca underlines that all this corruption has taken place in the presence of virtuous men like Pompey, Cicero, Caesar and Cato himself, reaching the conclusion that such things will be done in the future as they have been done in the past (*et fient et facta sunt ista*).⁸⁴

It is the first time – at least in extant literature – that the theory of decadence has been questioned, by being considered as a predicament shared by all mankind. The vocabulary used by Seneca serves this objective of 'universalisation' of decadence theories: in Ben. 1.10, all generations (*maiores nostri, nos, posteri nostri*) share the same sense of human affairs (*res humanas*); in Ep. 97.1, it is stated that each man accuses his own age (*suis quisque temporibus*). The fact that all people were, are and will be convinced that they live in an era of decadence is exactly what renders this theory untenable. Vices are characteristic of mankind, not of the times (*hominum sunt ista non temporum*). Contrary to the poets of the Augustan period, who focus on the Romans' feeling of decline, Seneca applies it to all humans, adopting a more universalist perspective, in conformity with Stoic philosophy.⁸⁵

Furthermore, Seneca is also interested in the causes of human propensity to vice, which creates the wrong impression of decadence from one era to the other. In *De beneficiis*, the philosopher explains that human nature does not change across time; the exact character of vices is what in fact changes, since every generation is tormented by different moral vices (Ben. 1.10.2):

84) Sen. Ep. 97.2–8.

85) Seneca expresses such a universalist perspective in De ot. 4, where he distinguishes between two *res publicae*: one in which gods and men are contained and the one to which the particular circumstances of birth have assigned us. See on this passage Schofield 1991, 93–94. On the Stoic universalist and cosmopolitan conception of the city generally, see *ibid.*, 57–92, 102–103, 133, 141–145.

Non expectant uno loco uitia, sed mobilia et inter se dissidentia tumultuantur, pellunt in uicem fuganturque; ceterum idem semper de nobis pronuntiare debebimus, malos esse nos, malos fuisse, – inuitus adiciam, et futuros esse.

(Sen. Ben. 1.10.3)

Vices do not wait expectantly in just one spot, but are always in movement and, being at variance with each other, are in constant turmoil, they rout and in turn are routed; but the verdict we are obliged to pronounce upon ourselves will always be the same: wicked we are, wicked we have been, and, I regret to add, always shall be.

This theory is at odds with what Seneca had stated in Ep. ad Lucil. 95, where a certain degeneration of *mores* is admitted: philosophy was once simpler because men's sins were on a smaller scale, and could be cured more easily.⁸⁶ This is not the only paradox. In his effort to show that his era is no worse than others, Seneca ends up advocating a much more pessimistic view, according to which human nature is vicious. Virtuous men are simply an exception to this reality:

10. *Omne tempus Clodios, non omne Catones feret. Ad deteriora faciles sumus, quia nec dux potest nec comes deesse, et res ipsa etiam sine duce, sine comite procedit. Non proum est tantum ad uitia, sed praeceps, et quod plerisque inemendabiles facit, omnium aliarum artium peccata artificibus pudori sunt offenduntque deerrantem, uitae peccata delectant.* 11. *Non gaudet nauigio gubernator euerso, non gaudet aegro medicus elato, non gaudet orator, si patroni culpa reus cecidit; at contra omnibus crimen suum uoluptati est.*

(Sen. Ep. 97.10–11)

10. All ages will produce men like Clodius, but not all ages men like Cato. We degenerate easily, because we lack neither guides nor associates in our wickedness, and the wickedness goes on of itself, even without guides or associates. The road to vice is not only downhill, but steep; and many men are rendered incorrigible by the fact that, while in all other crafts errors bring shame to good craftsmen and cause vexation to those who go astray, the errors of life are a positive source of pleasure. 11. The pilot is not glad when his ship is thrown on her beam-

86) See Sen. Ep. 95.4; cf. Sen. NQ 7.31–32, where Seneca clearly describes the decay of moral standards; cf. also Sen. Ep. 114.1–2, 8–12, where Seneca argues that the literary style of some periods is more to be admired than that of others. Despite admitting that literary decadence reflects the moral standards of an era, he does not make a case for a straightforward trajectory of decline; by contrast, the character of the individual is critical (Ep. 114.1: *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis uita*).

ends; the physician is not glad when he buries his patient; the orator is not glad when the defendant loses a case through the fault of his advocate; but on the other hand every man enjoys his own crimes.

The propensity to decadence is not applied to societies as a whole, but separately to each man. The metaphor of fall, on which the theory of decadence relies, is contained in the words *pronus* and *praeceps*.⁸⁷ This road to downfall is attributed to an innate characteristic of almost all humans (*plerosque, omnibus*), which consists in finding pleasure in moral failings. Seneca's anthropology does not, of course, reduce itself to a mere reaction to decadence discourse, since the philosopher hints at a long debate on the viciousness of human nature.⁸⁸ He does not claim, however, that humans are only bad. In the next few lines, he explains that there is an idea of good conduct, present subconsciously even in the most depraved souls; and that is why all men hide their sins.⁸⁹ That being said, Seneca keeps asserting that all men are inclined to moral degeneration, thus more often failing to maintain their high moral standards. Thus, in Seneca, individuals decline; societies do not decline; they just remain at similar low moral standards.

The ideal point of reference for Seneca is not historical, since it is not provided by the past, but by the perfection of philosophy. This point of view is reflected in the philosopher's analysis of Posidonius' theory of the Golden Age in Ep. ad Lucil. 90. Seneca explores – and ultimately rejects – the possibility that the life of primitive humans was a Golden Age in moral terms: according to Posidonius, the first men and those who sprang from them did not experience corruption; for this reason, they had no need of laws, but, following nature, they entrusted themselves to the best man among them. However, when the progress of corruption transformed monarchies into tyrannies, a need arose for laws which were framed by the wise (Ep. 90.4–6).

87) See OLD, s. v. *pronus* 2; Ernout-Meillet, s. v. *pronus*, -a, -um; OLD, s. v. *praeceps* 1b; Ernout-Meillet, s. v. *caput*, -itis, *praeceps*, -cipitis.

88) See e. g. Thuc. 3.82.2; Sal. Hist. fr. 1.7 Maurenbrecher = 1.8 Ramsey = 1.13 La Penna-Funari. On the concept of human nature in ancient thought generally, see among others Adkins 1970; Reinhold 2002.

89) See Sen. Ep. 97.12: *Alioquin ut scias subesse animis etiam in pessima abductis boni sensum nec ignorari turpe, sed negligi; omnes peccata dissimulant et, quamuis feliciter cesserint, fructu illorum utuntur, ipsa subducunt.*

Whereas Seneca asserts that he accepts this theory⁹⁰ and criticises at great length the vices of later ages (in line with Ep. ad Lucil. 95),⁹¹ he clarifies at the end of Ep. ad Lucil. 90 that primitive humans were morally excellent and guileless, but they were not wise; it was simply by reason of their ignorance of technical progress that they were innocent.⁹² Seneca refutes Posidonius' theory that wise men contributed to technical progress which actually led to moral degeneration.⁹³ The Roman philosopher suggests instead that philosophy taught the principles of a life conforming to universal principles and despising pleasures.⁹⁴ According to Seneca, such a moral philosophy could not exist in a rude age where the arts and crafts were unknown, but it is – paradoxically – to be seen precisely when vices are at their worst.⁹⁵ Seneca's theory in Ep. ad Lucil. 90 seems thus to confirm and elucidate the author's anti-decadence discourse in *De beneficiis* and Ep. ad Lucil. 97, as far as the historical perception of decline and the role of individuals in decadent societies are concerned: even the primitive 'Golden Age', despite being acknowledged as a morally better generation, is not taken as an ideal point of reference by Seneca, who shows that individuals can achieve moral perfection even (or especially) in morally corrupt societies.

To sum up, the philosopher's anti-decline discourse relies on a pessimistic view of human nature and society, instead of offering a somewhat more optimistic view of the contemporary era, as in Horace and Ovid. The treatise *De Beneficiis* was written between A. D. 56 and 64;⁹⁶ the *Epistulae* were produced after Seneca's forced

90) Sen. Ep. 90.7: *Hactenus Posidonio adsentior ...*

91) See Sen. Ep. 90.19; 36 ff.

92) See Sen. Ep. 90.44–46.

93) See Sen. Ep. 90.7–32; see on Seneca's refutation of Posidonius' theory Laffranque 1964, 494–503; Bertoli 1982; Chaumartin 1988, 24–27; Nicolaidis 2002; Zago 2012, 49–108; Degl'Innocenti Pierini 2008 (espec. 108–109).

94) See Sen. Ep. 90.34–35.

95) Sen. Ep. 90.35: *Hanc philosophiam fuisse illo rudi saeculo, quo adhuc artificia deerant et ipso usu discebantur utilia, non credo.*

96) See Griffin [1976] 1992, 399; idem 2013, 91–96. Chaumartin 1989, 1702–1709, claims that *De beneficiis* should be placed between A. D. 59 and 61. See also Lentano 2014, 201, for a detailed bibliographical review on the precise dating of *De beneficiis*.

retirement in A.D. 62.⁹⁷ During these years, Seneca becomes more and more disillusioned with the policy of Nero. Since monarchy had been transformed into tyranny, the only remaining solution for Seneca and wise men in general was withdrawal from society and dedication to spiritual life.⁹⁸ It may be assumed, although not proved, that the philosopher transforms his own political experience into a general conclusion: if Nero's society failed to correct human faults, the same wickedness must be characteristic of any society. Wise men should thus abandon the vain effort of fighting against an imaginary decadence and turn their attention inwards. That is exactly what Seneca has done and that is what he tries to exhort his readers to do.⁹⁹

Critical meta-reflection on decadence also appears in Tacitus, where the polarity between decadence and anti-decadence discourse, articulated by the interlocutors in the *Dialogus de oratoribus*,¹⁰⁰ but also in the *Annales*, leads to both the nuancing of the validity of the decline-scheme and the acknowledgement, for the first time in extant texts, of its necessity for social improvement. Since the work is addressed to L. Fabius Justus, suffect consul in A.D. 102, it has been suggested that it may be dated to this year or thereabouts;¹⁰¹ others have proposed an earlier date of composition, during the decade of A.D. 80–90,¹⁰² or in 97.¹⁰³ The purpose of

97) See Griffin [1976] 1992, 400.

98) A similar idea is expressed in Sen. Tranq. An. 4–5; see also Sen. De ira 3.6: Chaumartin 1989, 1711–1723, highlights Seneca's disillusion with Nero and with Roman society in general. Cf. Griffin 2002, 332–337; idem 2013, 54–74. For a detailed discussion of Seneca's conception of the imperial regime, see Chaumartin 1985, 157–206. On Seneca's pessimism regarding the imperial regime in *De beneficiis*, see Letta 1997–1998.

99) See Griffin 2013, 96, on the exhortative character of the *De beneficiis*.

100) The Tacitean authorship of the *Dialogus* has been doubted since the Renaissance, but it seems to be unanimously admitted by recent scholarship. See Peterson [1893] 1997, ii–xii; Mayer 2001, 18–22.

101) Syme [1958] 1997, 112, 670–673; Mayer 2001, 22–27; Williams 1978, 26–27, 36–45.

102) Peterson [1893] 1997, xi–xxii; Mayer 2001, 22–27. See Luce 1993, 11, for an extensive literature review on the question of authenticity and dating of the *Dialogus*. See also Rutledge 2012, 64.

103) Barnes 1986.

the dialogue, clearly stated in the prologue (§ 1.1), is to investigate the causes of the decline of Roman eloquence;¹⁰⁴ this question will turn out to be a political one. The author reproduces a conversation between some talented speakers (§ 1.2), which took place in A. D. 75,¹⁰⁵ at the house of Curiatus Maternus, a barrister, senator and tragic poet.

In the first part of the *Dialogus*, a discussion is held on the merits of *eloquentia* and poetry: Aper, a barrister and teacher of Tacitus, defends eloquence and Maternus stands with poetry (§ 5–13). The arrival of Vipstanus Messala, a young aristocrat and orator, turns the conversation to a different question: is Roman eloquence in decline? Aper defends modern orators in various ways: he calls into question the conventional distinction between old and new orators, by stating that the limits are somewhat blurred (§ 16–18);¹⁰⁶ he also insists on the imperfections and defects of older orators, Cicero included (§ 18–23).¹⁰⁷ The fact that older orators are considered superior to their modern successors is attributed to a common defect of human nature:

uitio autem malignitatis humanae uetera semper in laude, praesentia in fastidio esse.

(Tac. Dial. 18.3)

104) The decline of Roman oratory was an issue often discussed during the first century A. D. See Luce 1993, 12. Lévy 2003, compares the analysis of the decline of eloquence proposed by Seneca the Elder with the same discussion in Tacitus' *Dialogus*. According to Delpeyroux 2003, it is only Seneca the Elder who relies on the idea of decadence, whereas Tacitus develops Cicero's theory in *Brutus*, by situating the evolution of Roman eloquence within the complex political and social history of Rome.

105) See Syme [1958] 1997, 670; Williams 1978, 27, 34, 36–48; Berti 2009, on the dramatic date of the *Dialogus*. Cf. Letta 1985, who suggests that the dialogue was supposed to take place on the 7th of December A. D. 76.

106) According to Cytermann 2014, 118–129, Aper proposes an exclusively aesthetic construction of literary history, in which the important political rupture marked by the instauration of the *principatus* was not important as far as the evolution of oratory is concerned. Messala and then Maternus in their speeches will reverse this view of literary and political history, by insisting on the consequences of the regime change on Roman eloquence.

107) See Rocchi 2017, who systematically analyses the significant similarities of theme and argument in Aper's speech and in Horace's Ep. 2.1 to Augustus: both present Antiquity as a disvalue, by using essentially similar arguments.

You must blame it on the carping spirit of mankind that whereas what is old is always held in high esteem, anything modern gets the cold shoulder.

(Transl. S. W. Peterson [LOEB 1914],
as well as all translations of the *Dialogus*)

Scholars, despite having commented on the way this passage functions in the context of the dialogue, have not explored the broader philosophical implications of this strong anti-decline statement for Tacitus' conception of the past.¹⁰⁸ The adjective *humanae* and the adverb *semper* suggest that decadence theories must be viewed as an obsession of all mankind, which does not exclusively apply to eloquence, but to any domain. Like Seneca, Tacitus' Aper questions the validity of decline discourses, by reminding that those people in the past, present and future, who were, are and will be persuaded that their epoch is an epoch of decadence, cannot all be correct. Aper leaves no doubt as to his negative evaluation of this tendency of human nature, described by the words *uitio malignitatis humanae*. In jurists' discussions about slaves' handicaps, the noun *uitium* is most often interpreted as a permanent and innate default, contrary to *morbis*.¹⁰⁹ Along the same lines, but in a philosophical context, more relevant to the Tacitean passage under discussion, Cicero in the *Tusculanae* analyses the *uitia animi* as a permanent distortion and deformity of the soul, relying on the Stoic analysis of the passions.¹¹⁰ Even if these parallels do not, of course, suggest that Tacitus necessarily had a direct knowledge of those texts, they do point to the possibility that the word *uitium* has been chosen in order to highlight the permanent and distortive nature of decadence theory.

108) Levene 2004, 177, comments only on the way Aper's statement is related to the literary history proposed by the interlocutor and remarks that "it is true that this passage denies the sort of simple determinism that would associate one form of oratory with a particular time", but "to say that there are many good forms of oratory does not entail that all forms are equally good". Rocchi 2017, 178–180, analyses this phrase as "a well-weighted *sententia* of general value", and cites it among other passages which aim to identify the *antiquorum admiratores* as a target.

109) See Gell. 4.2; Ulp. Dig. 21.1.1.7–11, with Ducos 2010, 90–93.

110) See Cic. Tusc. 4.13.28–30: ... *Morbis appellant totius corporis corruptionem, aegrotationem morbum cum imbellicitate, uitium cum partes corporis inter se dissident, ex quo prauitas membrorum, distortio, deformitas ... uitiositas autem est habitus aut adfectio in tota uita inconstans et a se ipsa dissentiens ... Vitia enim adfectiones sunt manentes ...* On Cicero's analysis of passions in this passage see Pigeaud 2006, 265–275.

Messala then responds to Aper and attempts to explain the reasons why the ancient orators are superior; according to Messala, the decline of eloquence goes hand in hand with a general decline in taste, due to the neglect of ancient morality and education.¹¹¹ Messala replies to Aper's anti-decline discourse by juxtaposing a stereotypical decadence theory.

What should be deduced from this juxtaposition of arguments about Tacitus' own standpoint regarding decadence theories?¹¹² Some scholars have insisted on the pragmatic or even cynical aspects revealed in Aper's speech, such as his pride at his rise in Rome despite his obscure origins (§ 7.1, 10.2) and the reference to *delatores* who are listed among Aper's oratorical models (§ 8.1–4); on these grounds, it has been assumed by some that Tacitus would disapprove of Aper's arguments.¹¹³ Others have argued, on the contrary, that Tacitus, himself a distinguished imperial orator, would naturally stand with the 'modernist' point of view of Aper: the fact that the author chooses to explore the collapse of Ciceronian rhetorical values does not necessarily mean that he regrets this collapse, especially taking into account that Tacitus never asserts in his own voice the decline of oratory.¹¹⁴ As a counterweight to both readings, scholars are increasingly tending to conclude that Tacitus gives a wide range of opinions, each of which could be valid for different reasons. The tension between the 'traditionalist' and 'modernist' conception of literary history does not thus need to be resolved.¹¹⁵

111) See along the same lines Sen. Controv. 1 praef. 7.

112) See Luce 1993, 18–25, for a complete literature review on the extent to which each speaker's argumentation reflects Tacitus' opinion.

113) See Barnes 1986, 237–238; Dammer 2005; cf. Williams 1978, 28, who argues that Aper's speech reveals his "brashness and pragmatism and his vulgar sense of values", but does not share the view that his opinion can be completely dismissed (see *supra*, n. 112).

114) See Champion 1994; Goldberg 1999; idem 2009.

115) Klingner 1932, 153–156, already argued that Tacitus does not entirely share Maternus' opinion, but he does share the antinomies of his character. Häussler 1965, 235–236, stressed that Tacitus simultaneously expresses the point of view of the historian Maternus, the moralist Messalla and the aesthetic Aper. Williams 1978, 45, concludes that "the greatness of the *Dialogus* lies in the author's capacity to see the strength of different points of view and to demonstrate that none can be simply dismissed". This analysis has been developed by Van den Berg 2014, *passim* (espec. 17–97, 124–164), who claims that the inconsistencies of the *Dialogus* do not need to

This deconstructive analysis seems strengthened by the fact that the narrator Tacitus never offers any endorsement for any of the interlocutors' contradicting arguments.¹¹⁶ Instead of presuming an unresolved opposition between two contradictory stances, Levene has suggested that despite the obvious and unresolved disagreement between the speakers, the debate develops with each speaker building upon and improving the account of his predecessor. Maternus' final speech (§ 40–41) appears thus as a conclusive synthesis looking to a more fundamental level of explanation and taking into account the underlying structure of society as a whole, in order to examine changes in oratory.¹¹⁷

The fact that neither Aper's nor Messala's point of view is accepted in its entirety in the conclusive synthesis proposed by Maternus (§ 40–41) might thus point to a more moderate point of view, which should be drawn as a conclusion from the debate. According to Maternus, history and the examples of different cities demonstrate that oratory can only be developed in societies facing political turmoil; after the establishment of the *principatus*, eloquence has become superfluous, since it is not the multitude that decides, but a monarch who is the incarnation of wisdom (§ 41.4–5). Maternus admits that oratory has indeed declined, but he underlines at the same time that this decadence is accompanied by progress in political terms. It is possible that Maternus' unconditional approval of the *principatus* is to some extent ironic, since it is contradictory to Maternus' historical and Tacitean persona.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, it would perhaps be going too far to deduce a revolutionary discourse against the regime, hidden behind the lines of Maternus' speech.¹¹⁹ The conclusion of this final speech takes the form of a moral les-

be resolved, since they are part of the work's design and reflect the complexity of the issue discussed. The reader is not invited to accept or reject any point of view. See also along the same lines Rutledge 2012.

116) On the author's presence and absence in the *Dialogus*, see Levene 2004, 192–196.

117) Levene 2004.

118) See on this point Williams 1978, 33–36; See also Bartsch 1994, 89–125 (esp. 104 ff.), who reminds us that in his first speech, Maternus hints at his own death and disgrace (Dial. 11.2), of which Tacitus and his readers may have been aware.

119) Cf. Bartsch 1994, 110 ff.

son illustrating the attitude of a wise man towards changing times, whether he is satisfied with the political circumstances or not:

nunc, quoniam nemo eodem tempore adsequi potest magnam famam et magnam quietem, bono saeculi sui quisque citra obtrECTIONEM alterius utatur.

(Tac. Dial. 41.5)

As things are, since it is impossible for anybody to enjoy at one and the same time great renown and great repose, let everyone make the most of the blessings his own times afford without disparaging any other age.

Instead of lamenting decadence, every wise man (*quisque*) should try to enjoy the blessings of his own times. Contrary to Messala's view, decline in some aspects, such as *eloquentia*, does not necessarily reflect the same trend in almost all other domains of human activity. Aper's point seems more tenable, inasmuch as it views the feeling of decadence as a universal feature which needs to be nuanced. However, would Tacitus go so far as to cast this feeling back to "a default of human meanness" (*uitio malignitatis humanae*)?

The historian's perspective can be further elucidated by appealing to a passage in the third book of the *Annales*, published some years later.¹²⁰ Tacitus reports the stern measures introduced by the *aediles* against luxury in A. D. 22. The question was referred to Tiberius, who answers with a letter in which he explains his hesitation to support such measures, as they would arouse animosities (§ 53–54). Then, Tacitus opens a digression (§ 55), in order to explain why luxury went gradually out of fashion after the reign of Galba (A. D. 68), whereas it had been practised in an extravagant way during the period after the Actian War (31 B. C.). After explaining the social and historical reasons, Tacitus concludes the digression by giving an alternative reason that could explain the change in *mores* after A. D. 68:

Nisi forte rebus cunctis inest quidam uelut orbis, ut quem ad modum temporum uices, ita morum uertantur; nec omnia apud priores meliora, sed nostra quoque aetas multa laudis et artium imitanda posteris tulit. Verum haec nobis in maiores certamina ex honesto manean.

(Tac. Ann. 3.55.5)

120) Syme [1958] 1997, 470–474, dates Book 3 around 116–117 A. D.

Or should we rather say there is a kind of cycle in all things – moral as well as seasonal revolutions? Nor, indeed, were all things better in the old time before us; but our own age too has produced much in the sphere of true nobility and much in that of art which posterity well may imitate. In any case, may the honourable competition of our present with our past long remain!

(Transl. C. H. Moore [LOEB 1931])

Tacitus hints at a long-standing theory, dating back to Hesiod,¹²¹ according to which historical time follows a cyclical pattern.¹²² The use of the nouns *orbis* and *uices* points to the cyclical nature of time.¹²³ The historian relies on this theory, in order to apply it more precisely to *mores*. Nevertheless, the second sentence (*nec omnia ... tulit*) tends to mitigate the inflexibility inherent in this theory: instead of affirming the predetermined alternation of cycles of good and bad eras, Tacitus stresses that some things were better in older times, whereas others are better now.¹²⁴ Decline in some aspects – even decline of *mores* – may occur at the same time as progress in others. This conclusion is along the lines of Maternus' conclusion in the *Dialogus*.

However, in the *Annales*, Tacitus does not content himself with relativising the validity of decline discourses: he goes on to affirm that decadence theories can be useful to societies, because they encourage competition (*certamina*) between ancients and moderns. Thus, the feeling of decadence is there to encourage the self-improvement of mankind. Tacitus seems to base the superiority of the present age mostly on the domain of the arts (*artium*), but the theory as a whole is expressed in a manner appropriate to any area of human activity.¹²⁵

121) Hes. Op. 106–201.

122) On this much debated theory see Vassiliades 2018, with updated bibliography.

123) On *orbis* see Woodman / Martin 1996, ad loc., who comment on the way Tacitus' *Annals* are implicitly based on the theory of 'cycles' of history.

124) The idea that some things are better now also appears in Tac. Ann. 3.34; Plin. Ep. 6.21.1; Rhet. Her. 4.2.4; On this *topos*, see Häußler 1965, 233–234. See also Döpp 1989, 81–82, who shows, however, that in Tacitus' view, *bona exempla* are only exceptions to the general rule of decadence.

125) See Syme [1958] 1997, 565; Woodman / Martin 1996, ad loc.; cf. Döpp 1989, 80–82, who claims that Tacitus is still talking about morality.

This analysis could be useful in order to understand Tacitus' stance in the *Dialogus*. Messala's and Maternus' opinion that oratory is in decline may be correct, but this does not reflect a general decadence of *artes*: in the *Annales*, Tacitus underlines that his own age has produced much in the sphere of art. Moreover, Maternus' conclusion that decline in some aspects may go hand in hand with progress in others is validated in the *Annales*. Nevertheless, Tacitus' reflection on decadence theories becomes a meta-reflection, because it leads him to acknowledge the *raison d'être* of these ideas. The historian would thus accept the universal character of the feeling of decadence, but would not be disposed to interpret it as a *uitium* of mankind, as Aper does in the *Dialogus*.

This temperate Tacitean discourse on decadence relies probably on an equally sober ideological stance towards the *principatus*. Monarchy seems to be viewed as a political reality with its advantages and defaults,¹²⁶ in which signs of progress coexist with symptoms of decadence. Tacitus appears to be a man devoid of illusions not only for the new, but also for the old order state.¹²⁷ He is well aware that eloquence is of course no more what it used to be during the Republican times, since political needs have changed, but he does not accept that *artes* in general are in decline. This consciousness may explain why Tacitus finally decides to become a historian instead of an orator, after an active engagement with oratory:¹²⁸ in conformity with Maternus' conclusion in the *Dialogus*, the historian decides to take advantage of his own age, by choosing a domain in progress rather than one in decline.

Conclusions

The expansion of decline theories during the late Republic created the conditions for an anti-decline discourse, for which Livy provides evidence in Book 26, and which is reflected in two Augustan poetic texts, Horace's Ep. 2.1 and Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.

126) See for a more detailed discussion on this point Syme [1958] 1997, 107; Williams 1978, 49–50; Cytermann 2014, 128.

127) See Klingner 1932; Syme [1958] 1997, 547–550.

128) See along the same lines Syme [1958] 1997, 111.

Horace speaks in critical tones about the Romans' obsession with decadence, which results in a hostile attitude towards everything new. Both the poet himself and the prince are victims of this exclusively Roman ideological standpoint. The questioning of decadence theories is used by Horace in order to establish an undercover dialogue between himself and Augustus. Through this dialogue, the poet expresses his sympathy to the prince for the difficult task he has undertaken and, at the same time, politely refuses the prince's demands to write poetry in his honour, pointing to his inability to complete such a serious mission. Ovid's anti-decline discourse is also inscribed in the political context of Augustan Rome. The poet introduces the notion that decadence is a historical reality, but that decline in some aspects, like *mores*, may be accompanied by progress in others, like *cultus*. Through his theory, Ovid's readers would, however, be expected to deduce from the text the inconsistencies of Augustus' decline rhetoric.

Anti-decadence discourse in Augustan literature emerges from a need to take a stance towards the new political realities. The self-portrayal of the new regime as a solution to the on-going decline through the revival of the past, but in a new political form, has encouraged a deeper reflection on decadence. This explains why anti-decadence theories focus exclusively on the Roman paradigm.

The step towards the 'universalisation' of anti-decline discourse has, predictably, been taken by the Stoic Seneca and has then been further elaborated by Tacitus. By highlighting that the sense of living in an era of decadence is inherent in human nature, since it is shared among mankind throughout time, Seneca and Tacitus nuance the validity of decline theories. According to Seneca's analysis in *De Beneficiis* and Ep. ad Lucil. 97, there can be no decline of societies, since vices are innate in human nature and only change form through the centuries; readers are thus invited to focus on their self-improvement, instead of lamenting the decadence of society. The parallel examination of the *Dialogus* and § 3.55 of the *Annales* has revealed that Tacitus pushed meta-reflection on the feeling of decadence toward a more sophisticated approach: the validity of decadence theories is called into question for reasons similar to those elaborated by Seneca; however, the usefulness of decline discourse is acknowledged as a factor triggering competition and thus improvement.

The evolution of decline and anti-decline theories is closely linked to the historical and ideological context in which they are articulated. Roman meta-reflection on decadence becomes more and more intellectually sophisticated. A gradual shift has been observed, from the predominance of the decline concept to the questioning of its validity and finally to the acknowledgment of its intellectual necessity for mankind.

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Nicosia

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