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Excerpt
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The Birth of Tragedy

An Attempt at Self-Criticism¹

Whatever underlies this questionable book, it must be a most stimulating and supremely important question and, furthermore, a profoundly personal one – as is attested by the times in which it was written, and *in spite of which* it was written, the turbulent period of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1. While the thunder of the Battle of Wörth rolled across Europe, the brooder and lover of riddles who fathered the book was sitting in some corner of the Alps, utterly preoccupied with his ponderings and riddles and consequently very troubled and untroubled at one and the same time, writing down his thoughts about the *Greeks* – the core of this odd and rather inaccessible book to which this late preface (or postscript) is to be dedicated. A few weeks later he was himself beneath the walls of Metz and still obsessed with the question marks he had placed over the alleged ‘cheerfulness’² of the Greeks; until finally, in that extremely tense month when peace was being discussed at Versailles, he too made peace with himself and, whilst recovering slowly from an illness which he had brought back from the field, reached a settled and definitive view in his own mind of the ‘Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of *Music*’ – from music? Music and tragedy? Greeks and the music of tragedy? Greeks and the pessimistic work

¹ The first edition of *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* was published in 1872. In 1886 Nietzsche published a new edition with a slightly modified title: *The Birth of Tragedy. Or Hellenism and Pessimism . . . New Edition with an Attempt at Self-Criticism*. The main body of the second-edition text is virtually unchanged, but the *Attempt at Self-Criticism* is a retrospective addition, written more than ten years after the main text.

² Classicizing accounts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Germany often emphasize the ‘cheerfulness’ of Greek culture in contrast, for instance, with the weighty seriousness of the Middle Ages. Part of Nietzsche’s purpose in *The Birth of Tragedy* is to give a more complex account of the phenomenon of Greek cheerfulness which will make it compatible with what Nietzsche takes to be the pessimistic insights of Schopenhauer (*cf. esp. below, The Birth of Tragedy* § 11).

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of art? The finest, most beautiful, most envied race of men ever known, the people who made life seem most seductive, the Greeks – what, they of all people *needed* tragedy? Or even: art? What purpose was served by Greek art?

The reader will have guessed at which point I had placed the great question mark over the value of existence. Is pessimism *necessarily* a sign of decline, decay, malformation, of tired and debilitated instincts – as was the case amongst the Indians and appears to be the case amongst us ‘modern men’ and Europeans? Is there a pessimism of *strength*? An intellectual preference for the hard, gruesome, malevolent and problematic aspects of existence which comes from a feeling of well-being, from overflowing health, from an *abundance* of existence? Is there perhaps such a thing as suffering from superabundance itself? Is there a tempting bravery in the sharpest eye which *demand*s the terrifying as its foe, as a worthy foe against which it can test its strength and from which it intends to learn the meaning of fear?³ What does the *tragic* myth mean, particularly amongst the Greeks of the best, strongest and bravest period? And the monstrous phenomenon of the Dionysiac? And tragedy, born from the Dionysiac? Conversely, those things which gave rise to the death of tragedy – Socratism in ethics, the dialectics, smugness and cheerfulness of theoretical man – might not this very Socratism be a sign of decline, of exhaustion, of sickness, of the anarchic dissolution of the instincts? And might not the ‘Greek cheerfulness’ of later Hellenism be simply the red flush across the evening sky? Might not the Epicurean will to *oppose* pessimism be mere prudence on the part of someone who is sick? And science itself, our science – what indeed is the meaning of all science, viewed as a symptom of life? What is the purpose, and, worse still, what is the *origin* of all science? What? Is scientific method perhaps no more than fear of and flight from pessimism? A subtle defence against – *truth*? Or, to put it in moral terms, is it something like cowardice and insincerity? To put it immorally, is it a form of cunning? O, Socrates, Socrates, was that perhaps *your* secret? O, mysterious ironist, was this perhaps your – irony?

2

What I had got hold of at that time was something fearsome and dangerous, a problem with horns, not necessarily a bull, but at any rate a *new* problem; today I would say that it was the *problem of science* (*Wissenschaft*) itself,

³ In Wagner’s *Siegfried* the hero does not know the meaning of fear, and sets out to try to discover it.

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science grasped for the first time as something problematic and questionable. But the book in which my youthful courage and suspicion vented itself – what an *impossible* book was bound to grow out of a task so at odds with youth! Constructed entirely from precocious, wet-behind-the-ears, personal experiences, all of which lay at the very threshold of what could be communicated, located in the territory of *art* – for the problem of science cannot be recognized within the territory of science – perhaps a book for artists with some subsidiary capacity for analysis and retrospection (in other words for an exceptional type of artist, a type you would have to go looking for, but one you would not actually care to find), full of psychological innovations and the concealments of an artiste,⁴ with an artiste's metaphysics in the background, a youthful work full of youthful courage and youthful melancholy, independent, standing defiantly on its own two feet even where it appears to bow before an authority and its own veneration, in short a first book in every bad sense of the word despite its old man's problem, burdened with all the errors of youth, above all with its 'much too long', its 'storm and stress';⁵ on the other hand, as far as the success it enjoyed is concerned (particularly with the great artist to whom it addressed itself, in a kind of dialogue, namely Richard Wagner), a book which has *proved* itself, by which I mean one which at least satisfied 'the best of its time'.⁶ This fact alone means that it should be treated with some consideration and reticence; nevertheless, I shall not suppress entirely just how unpleasant it now seems to me, how alien it seems, standing there before me sixteen years later – before eyes which are older and a hundred times more spoiled, but by no means colder, nor grown any more of a stranger to the task which this reckless book first dared to approach: *to look at science through the prism of the artist, but also to look at art through the prism of life.*⁷

3

I repeat: I find it an impossible book today. I declare that it is badly written, clumsy, embarrassing, with a rage for imagery and confused in its imagery,

⁴ *Artistenmetaphysik* is translated here as 'the metaphysics of the artiste' (rather than artist) because Nietzsche chooses *Artist* in preference to the usual term *Künstler*.

⁵ The *Sturm und Drang* is the name given to a youthfully rebellious movement in German literature in the 1770s.

⁶ Schiller (Prologue to *Wallenstein's Camp*, lines 48ff).

⁷ *Optik* is an unusual term which I have rendered as 'prism', but which might also have been translated as 'lens'.

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emotional, here and there sugary to the point of effeminacy, uneven in pace, lacking the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore too arrogant to prove its assertions, mistrustful even of the *propriety* of proving things, a book for the initiated, ‘music’ for those who were baptized in the name of music, who, from the very beginning, are linked to one another by shared, rare experiences of art, a sign by which blood-relations *in artibus*⁸ could recognize one another – an arrogant and wildly enthusiastic book which, from the outset, shuts itself off from the *profanum vulgus*⁹ of the ‘educated’ even more than from the ‘common people’, but also one which, as its effect proved and continues to prove, knows well enough how to seek out its fellow-enthusiasts and to entice them on to new, secret paths and places to dance. At any rate – and this was admitted with as much curiosity as aversion – a *strange*¹⁰ voice was speaking here, the disciple of an as yet ‘unknown god’ who concealed himself beneath the cowl of a scholar, beneath the ponderousness and dialectical disinclination of the Germans, even beneath the bad manners of a Wagnerite; here was a spirit with strange needs, nameless as yet, a memory brimming over with questions, experiences, hidden things to which the name Dionysos had been appended as yet another question mark; here one heard – as people remarked distrustfully – something like the voice of a mystical and almost maenadic soul which stammers in a strange tongue, with great difficulty and capriciously, almost as if undecided whether to communicate or conceal itself. It ought to have *sung*, this ‘new soul’, and not talked! What a pity it is that I did not dare to say what I had to say at that time as a poet; perhaps I could have done it! Or at least as a philologist; even today everything is still there for a philologist to discover and excavate in this area! Above all the problem *that* a problem exists here – and that, for as long as we have no answer to the question, ‘What is Dionysiac?’, the Greeks will remain as utterly unknown and unimaginable as they have always been . . .

4

Yes, what is Dionysiac? – This book contains an answer to that question – a man who ‘knows’ speaks here, an initiate and disciple of his god. Perhaps

⁸ ‘In the arts’.

⁹ ‘The crowd that must stand outside the temple and is allowed no access to the sacred rites performed inside’: phrase used by Horace (*Odes* III. 1) of those who are to be excluded from the realm of poetry.

¹⁰ The German term *fremd* has a range of meanings, extending from ‘strange’ through ‘foreign’ to ‘alien’.

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I would now speak more cautiously and less eloquently about such a difficult psychological question as the origin of tragedy amongst the Greeks. One fundamental question concerns the Greeks' relationship to pain, the degree of their sensitivity – did this relationship remain constant, or did it become inverted? – the question of whether the Greeks' ever more powerful *demand for beauty* (*Schönheit*), for festivals, entertainments, new cults, really grew from a lack, from deprivation, from melancholy, from pain. If one supposes that this was indeed the case – and Pericles (or Thucydides) indicates as much in the great funeral oration¹¹ – what then must have been the source of the opposing demand, which emerged at an earlier point in time, the *demand for ugliness*, the older Hellenes' good, severe will to pessimism, to the tragic myth, to affirm the image of all that is fearsome, wicked, mysterious, annihilating and fateful at the very foundations of existence – where must the origins of tragedy have lain at that time? Perhaps in *desire and delight* (*Lust*), in strength, in overbrimming health, in an excess of plenitude? In this case what is the meaning (in physiological terms) of that madness – Dionysiac madness – from which both the tragic and the comic arts emerged? What? Is madness perhaps not necessarily a symptom of degeneration, of decline, of a culture that has gone on too long? Are there perhaps – and this is a question for psychiatrists – neuroses of *health*, of national youth and youthfulness? What does the synthesis of goat and god in the satyr point to? What experience of their own nature, what impulse compelled the Greeks to think of the Dionysiac enthusiast and primal man as a satyr? And as far as the origin of the tragic chorus is concerned – did perhaps endemic fits exist during those centuries when the Greek body was in its prime and the Greek soul brimmed over with life? Were there visions and hallucinations which conveyed themselves to entire communities, entire cultic assemblies? What? If the Greeks were pessimists and had the will to tragedy precisely when they were surrounded by the riches of youth, if, to quote Plato, it was precisely madness which brought the *greatest* blessings to Hellas,¹² and if, on the other hand and conversely, it was precisely during their period of dissolution and weakness that the Greeks became ever more optimistic, more superficial, more actorly, but also filled with a greater lust for logic and for making the world logical, which is to say both more 'cheerful' and more 'scientific' – could it then perhaps be the case, despite all 'modern ideas' and the prejudices of democratic taste, that the victory of *optimism*, the predominance

¹¹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* II.35ff. ¹² *Phaedrus* 244a.

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of *reasonableness*, practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*, like its contemporary, democracy, that all this is symptomatic of a decline in strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion? And that pessimism is precisely *not* a symptom of these things? Was Epicurus an optimist – precisely because he was *suffering*? – As you see, this book burdened itself with a whole bundle of difficult questions. So let us add the hardest question of all! What, when seen through the prism of *life*, is the meaning of morality?

5

Already in the preface to Richard Wagner it is asserted that art – and *not* morality – is the true *metaphysical* activity of man; several times in the book itself the provocative sentence recurs that the existence of the world is *justified* (*gerechtfertigt*) only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Indeed the whole book acknowledges only an artist's meaning (and hidden meaning) behind all that happens – a 'god', if you will, but certainly only an utterly unscrupulous and amoral artist-god who frees (*löst*) himself from the dire pressure of fullness and *over-fullness*, from *suffering* the oppositions packed within him, and who wishes to become conscious of his autarchic power and constant delight and desire, whether he is building or destroying, whether acting benignly or malevolently. The world as the release and redemption (*Erlösung*) of god, *achieved* at each and every moment, as the eternally changing, eternally new vision of the most suffering being of all, the being most full of oppositions and contradictions, able to redeem and release itself only in *semblance* (*Schein*); one may say that this whole artist's metaphysics is capricious, otiose, fantastical – but its essential feature is that it already betrays a spirit which will defend itself one day, whatever the danger, against the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence. Here, perhaps for the first time, a pessimism 'beyond good and evil' announces itself, here that 'perverse mentality'¹³ is put into words and formulations which Schopenhauer never tired of bombarding (before it had actually emerged) with his most wrathful imprecations and thunderbolts – a philosophy which dares to situate morality itself within the phenomenal world, to degrade it and to place it not merely amongst the phenomena (*Erscheinungen*) (in the sense of the idealist *terminus technicus*), but even amongst the 'deceptions' (*Täuschungen*), as semblance, delusion, error, interpretation, manipulation, art. Perhaps the best indication of the depth

¹³ Schopenhauer, *Parerga* 2, 107.

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of the *anti-moral* tendency in the book is its consistently cautious and hostile silence about Christianity – Christianity as the most excessive, elaborately figured development of the moral theme that humanity has ever had to listen to. In truth there is no greater antithesis of the purely aesthetic exegesis and justification of the world, as taught in this book, than the Christian doctrine which is, and wants to be, *only* moral, and which, with its absolute criteria (its insistence on god's truthfulness, for example) banishes art, *all* art, to the realm of *lies*, and thus negates, damns and condemns it. Behind this way of thinking and evaluating, which is bound to be hostile to art if it is at all genuine, I had always felt its *hostility to life*, a furious, vengeful enmity towards life itself; for all life rests on semblance, art, deception, prismatic effects, the necessity of perspectivism and error. From the very outset Christianity was essentially and pervasively the feeling of disgust and weariness which life felt for life, a feeling which merely disguised, hid and decked itself out in its belief in 'another' or 'better' life. Hatred of the 'world', a curse on the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality, a Beyond, invented in order better to defame the Here-and-Now, fundamentally a desire for nothingness, for the end, for rest, for the 'Sabbath of Sabbaths'¹⁴ – all this, together with the determination of Christianity to sanction *only* moral values, seemed to me the most dangerous and uncanny of all possible forms of a 'will to decline', at the very least a sign of the most profound sickness, tiredness, distemper, exhaustion, impoverishment of life – for before the court of morality (especially Christian, which is to say unconditional, morality) life *must* constantly and inevitably be proved wrong because life is essentially something amoral; life *must* eventually, crushed by the weight of contempt and the eternal 'no!', be felt to be inherently unworthy, undeserving of our desire. Morality itself – might it not be a 'will to negate life', a secret instinct for annihilation, a principle of decay, belittlement, calumny, the beginning of the end? And consequently the greatest danger of all? Thus my instinct turned *against* morality at the time I wrote this questionable book; as an advocate of life my instinct invented for itself a fundamentally opposed doctrine and counter-evaluation of life, a purely artistic one, an *anti-Christian* one. What was it to be called? As a philologist and man of words I baptized it, not without a certain liberty – for who can know the true name of the Antichrist? – by the name of a Greek god: I called it *Dionysiac*.

¹⁴ An eschatological day of complete and perfect rest.

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I wonder if the reader understands which task I was already daring to undertake with this book? I now regret very much that I did not yet have the courage (or immodesty?) at that time to permit myself a *language of my very own* for such personal views and acts of daring, labouring instead to express strange and new evaluations in Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulations, things which fundamentally ran counter to both the spirit and taste of Kant and Schopenhauer. What, after all, did Schopenhauer think about tragedy? This is what he says in *The World as Will and Representation*, II, p. 495: 'What gives to everything tragic, whatever the form in which it appears, the characteristic tendency to the sublime, is the dawning of the knowledge that the world and life can afford us no true satisfaction, and are therefore *not worth* our attachment to them. In this the tragic spirit consists; accordingly it leads to *resignation*.' How differently Dionysos spoke to me! How alien to me at that time was precisely this whole philosophy of resignation! But there is something much worse about the book which I regret even more than having obscured and ruined Dionysiac intimations with Schopenhauerian formulations, and this is the fact that I had *ruined* the grandiose *Greek problem* in general, as I had come to understand it, by mixing it up with the most modern things. Also the fact that I had attached hopes to things where there was nothing to hope for, where everything pointed all too clearly to an end. And that I should have begun to invent stories about the 'German character', on the basis of the latest German music, as if it were about to discover or re-discover itself – and this at a time when the German spirit, which had recently shown the will to rule Europe and the strength to lead Europe, had *abdicated*, finally and definitively, and, using the pompous pretext of founding an empire, was in a process of transition to mediocrity, democracy, and 'modern ideas'. Since then I have indeed learned to think hopelessly and unsparingly enough about this 'German character', and the same applies to current *German music*, which is Romanticism through and through and the most un-Greek of all possible forms of art; furthermore, as a ruiner of nerves it is in the first rank, a doubly dangerous thing amongst a people who love drink and who honour obscurity as a virtue, particularly for its dual properties as a narcotic which both intoxicates and *befogs* the mind. Setting aside all the premature hopes and the erroneous morals applied to the most contemporary things with which I ruined my first book, however, the great Dionysiac question it poses

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remains (with regard to music, too) as valid as ever: what would music be like if it were no longer Romantic in its origins, as German music is, but *Dionysiac*?

7

But, Sir, if *your* book is not Romanticism, what on earth is? Can the deep hatred of ‘the present’, ‘reality’ and ‘modern ideas’ be carried further than in your artiste’s metaphysics, which would prefer to believe in nothingness or in the devil rather than in ‘the present’. Is there not a ground bass¹⁵ of anger and delight in destruction rumbling away beneath all your contrapuntal vocal art and seduction of the ear, a furious determination to oppose the entire ‘present’, a will that is not too far removed from practical nihilism and which appears to say, ‘I would prefer that nothing were true, rather than know that *you* were right, that *your* truth turned out to be right.’ Just listen, Mr Pessimist and Deifier of Art, with a more attentive ear to a single passage from your own book, that not un-eloquent dragon-killer passage which can sound enticing and seductive to young ears and hearts; are you telling us that this is not the genuine, true Romantic’s confession of 1830 beneath the mask of the pessimism of 1850, behind which one can hear the opening bars of the usual Romantic finale – fracture, collapse, return, and prostration before an old belief, before *the* old god? Is not your pessimist’s book itself a piece of anti-Graecism and Romanticism, something which itself ‘both intoxicates and befogs the mind’, at any rate a narcotic, a piece of music even, of *German* music? Listen to this:

Let us imagine a rising generation with this fearless gaze, with this heroic attraction to what is monstrous, let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-slayers, the proud recklessness with which they turn their backs on all the enfeebled doctrines of scientific optimism so that they may ‘live resolutely’,¹⁶ wholly and fully; would not the tragic man of this culture, given that he has trained himself for what is grave and terrifying, be bound to desire a new form of art, the art of metaphysical solace, in fact to desire tragedy as his very own Helen, and to call out along with Faust:

And shall I not, with all my longing’s vigour
 Draw into life that peerless, lovely figure?¹⁷

¹⁵ A pattern of notes, especially a short melodic phrase, set in the bass and repeated over and over again in the course of a musical composition.

¹⁶ Goethe, *General Confession*. ¹⁷ Goethe, *Faust* II, 7438f.