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CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The Birth of Tragedy

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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings

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Introduction

Cosima Wagner's thirty-third birthday, her first since she and Wagner had married, fell on 25 December 1870. Wagner's present to her was the newly composed 'Siegfried Idyll'. He secretly arranged for a small group of musicians to assemble in the morning on the stairs outside her bedroom and they began to play as she awoke. One of the guests present at this performance was the newly appointed 26-year-old Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basle, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was an ardent admirer of Wagner's music, and he and Wagner shared an enthusiasm for the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer. The world as we know it, Schopenhauer thought, the world of objects in space and time held together by relations of cause and effect, was nothing but a representation, an illusion generated by the unending play of a metaphysical entity which he called 'the Will'. This Will, the underlying reality of the world, expressed itself in a variety of ways in the human world, most keenly in the form of sexual desire; it had each human individual in its grip and drove each of us on to forms of action that inevitably ended either in disgusting satiation or in frustration. The very nature of the universe precluded the possibility of any continuing human happiness. The best we could hope for, Schopenhauer argued, was momentary respite from the continual flux of willing and frustration through the contemplation of art. Aesthetic experience could have this effect because it is radically disinterested and thus extracts us from the world of willing. Music, in particular, is inherently non-representational, and Schopenhauer draws from this fact the stunning conclusion that music both gives us virtually direct access to ultimate reality, and is also one of the best ways available to us of distancing ourselves from the relentless throb of the Will.

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This heady combination of extreme pessimism, sexual fantasy presented as metaphysics and the deification of music was irresistible to Wagner, the unemployed kapellmeister who had spent a decade of his life in exile following his participation in the failed revolution of 1849 and who had experienced some difficulty in controlling the attractions the wives of various of his patrons and associates held for him. He was delighted to find a young academic who shared so many of his own passionate interests and Nietzsche became a frequent visitor at Wagner's house in Tribschen, near Lucerne, and an intimate friend of the family. On that Christmas morning he, too, had a present for Cosima, the manuscript of a study entitled 'Die Entstehung des tragischen Gedankens'. In turn he received a copy of Wagner's recent essay 'Beethoven' and a piano reduction of the first act of *Siegfried*. In the evening there were two further performances of the 'Siegfried Idyll', and Wagner read aloud from the text of *Die Meistersinger*. The next day Nietzsche's manuscript was read aloud and discussed. On 1 January 1871 Nietzsche returned to Basle and began work on his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music,* using some of the material he had originally elaborated in Cosima's birthday present. He dedicated the book to Wagner.

By 1886, when he was preparing a second edition of the work, Nietzsche claimed to have long since changed his mind about Wagner (and about Schopenhauer). As he would later put it, he had eventually overcome these two youthful enthusiasms, exchanging Schopenhauerian pessimism for a fully affirmative attitude towards life and coming to see Wagner as a *décadent* and the embodiment of everything that was to be rejected in modern culture. So the view has sometimes been expressed that the 'mature' Nietzsche became just as committed an anti-Wagnerian as his younger self had been pro-Wagner. This in turn has been taken to mean that one should read the main text of *The Birth of Tragedy* through the eyes of the 1886 Preface in which the mature anti-Wagnerian corrects the errors of his youth. Although the later Nietzsche did doubtless occasionally write things that could be interpreted as putting the matter in these simple terms – that he outgrew a deluded, early admiration for Wagner and his music and moved to a position of clear-sighted, unconditional rejection – it would be a mistake to take passages in which Nietzsche makes claims like this simply at face value. After all, Nietzsche prided himself on his ability to see things from a variety of different perspectives, even (and especially) when that resulted in holding views that to lesser minds would have seemed

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inconsistent, and he also prided himself on his ability to adopt a variety of different disguises or masks for his own deeper and more considered views. The later anti-Wagnerian pose is one such mask, a particular form of self-dramatization adopted at a certain time for particular reasons, and it must be treated with the same suspicion Nietzsche uses in analysing the self-interpretations of others.

Matters must from the very start have been slightly complicated at least on a personal level for the youthful Wagnerite in Tribschen, if only because Wagner in his own way was just as much an egocentric megalomaniac as Nietzsche was. At the time Cosima noted in her diary that for all his professed admiration of and devotion to Wagner the man and his music, Nietzsche seemed to be making a concerted effort to 'defend himself' against the overwhelming direct impact of Wagner's personality, and she suspected that he was preparing in some way to take revenge (*sich rächen*) for having been thus assaulted.[1] In addition, Nietzsche was in love with Cosima, and if the ageing Wagner had been able to detach her from her husband (the conductor Hans von Bülow), why could not the mustachioed young Professor of Philology and former artillerist, in turn, play Tristan to Wagner's Marke? Finally, Nietzsche fancied himself a composer, going so far as to make presents of various of his compositions to Cosima and to play some of them in the presence of 'the Master' (as he called Wagner, following Cosima's usage). These compositions caused Wagner much amusement, and while Cosima seems to have been well bred enough to confine her slighting comments about them to her diaries, Wagner let no opportunity pass to remind Nietzsche that he was a dilettant, whose 'music' deserved no serious attention. Correspondingly, throughout his life, even when he is writing in his most explicitly anti-Wagnerian mode, there is ample evidence of Nietzsche's continuing love of Wagner's music which clearly had a very powerful hold over him to the very end. Thomas Mann seems to me to get the matter right when he says that even Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner is 'inverted panegyric . . . another form of glorification' ('Panegyrikus mit umgekehrtem Vorzeichen . . . eine andere Form der Verherrlichung'), an expression of one of the major experiences of Nietzsche's life, his deep love–hate of Wagner and his music.[2] The love was there virtually from the beginning, as was the hate; both lasted to the very end.

[1] *Cf. Wagner-Handbuch*, ed. U. Müller and P. Wapnewski (Stuttgart, Kröner Verlag, 1986), pp. 114f.
[2] Thomas Mann, *Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners*, in *Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden* (Frankfurt-on-Main, Fischer, 1960), vol. IX, p. 373.

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Still, between 1871 and 1886 Nietzsche had clearly changed some of his views very significantly. In the new introduction to the second edition, Nietzsche does criticize some aspects of his youthful work quite severely, especially its breathless, hyperbolic style. He does not, however, completely repudiate it, but rather does his best to integrate some of its central claims into the course his thinking was later to take, to find in it the germs of ideas that he was later to develop more fully. This means that we are invited to read the text from a double perspective: that of the youthful follower of the Master – who, whatever his private reservations might have been, in the 1870s seriously proposed changing his profession to that of travelling lecturer on Wagnerism and propagandist for 'the idea of Bayreuth' – and that of the highly, if ambiguously, critical Nietzsche of the late 1880s.

The Birth of Tragedy is directed at two slightly different issues: on the one hand it is an attempt to answer a number of questions about culture and society: what is a human culture? Why is it important for us to participate in one? Are all human cultures fundamentally of the same type or do they differ in important ways? Under what circumstances will a human culture flourish, and under what circumstances will it become 'decadent' and decay or even 'die'? The highest form of culture we know, Nietzsche thinks, is that of ancient Greece, and the most perfect expression of that culture is fifth-century Attic tragedy, but the depredations of time make our knowledge of that culture at best fragmentary and indirect. Attic tragedy was a public spectacle in which poetry, music, and dance were essential constituents, but the tradition of ancient music and dance has been completely lost, so we cannot know (Attic) tragedy as the ancients would have known it. The most vital contemporary form of culture is Wagnerian music-drama, which is also something to which we have full and immediate access,[3] so it makes sense to study the general questions about the nature of culture by looking at the origin, the flourishing, and the decline of Attic tragedy in the light of our experience of Wagner's music-drama. In this sense *The Birth of Tragedy* is a specific intervention in a debate that was conducted during the nineteenth century about what form modern society and modern culture should take. Roughly speaking, *The Birth of Tragedy* asks: how can we remedy the ills of 'modern' society? Nietzsche's answer is: by constructing a new 'tragic culture' centred on an idealized version of Wagnerism.

[3] Although when *The Birth of Tragedy* was written most of Wagner's music-dramas had never been staged and Nietzsche will have known them through piano reductions of the scores.

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The second set of issues with which *The Birth of Tragedy* is concerned derives from the tradition of Western philosophical theology. The second basic question is: 'Is life worth living?' Nietzsche's answer is (roughly): 'No (*but* in a tragic culture one can learn to tolerate the knowledge that it is not).' Obviously the two questions are intimately connected.

The argument in the text falls into roughly three parts. The first part (§§ 1–10) describes the origin of tragedy in ancient Greece as the outcome of a struggle between two forces, principles, or drives. Nietzsche names each of these principles after an ancient Greek deity (Apollo, Dionysos) who can be thought of as imaginatively representing the drive in question in an especially intense and pure way. 'Apollo' embodies the drive toward distinction, discreteness and individuality, toward the drawing and respecting of boundaries and limits; he teaches an ethic of moderation and self-control. The Apolline artist glorifies individuality by presenting attractive images of individual persons, things, and events. In literature the purest and most intense expression of the Apolline is Greek epic poetry (especially Homer). The other contestant in the struggle for the soul of ancient Greece was Dionysos. The Dionysiac is the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess. The purest artistic expression of the Dionysiac was quasi-orgiastic forms of music, especially of choral singing and dancing.

Although these two impulses are in some sense opposed to each other, they generally coexist in any given human soul, institution, work of art, etc. (although one will usually also be dominant). It is precisely the tension between the two of them that is particularly creative. The task is to get them into a productive relation to each other. This happens, for instance, when the Dionysiac singing and dancing of a chorus is joined with the more restrained and ordered speech and action of individual players on a stage, as in Attic tragedy. The synthesis of Apollo and Dionysos in tragedy (in which the musical, Dionysiac element, Nietzsche claims, has a certain dominance) is part of a complex defence against the pessimism and despair which is the natural existential lot of humans.

Tragedy consoles us and seduces us to continue to live, but the synthesis it represents is a fragile one, and the second part of Nietzsche's text (§§ 11–15) describes how the balance is upset by the arrival of a new force, principle, or drive, which Nietzsche associated with Socrates. Socrates does not try to attain metaphysical consolation through the dissolution of boundaries (Dionysos) or glory in the loving cultivation of individual

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appearance (Apollo); rather, his life is devoted to the creation of abstract generalizations and the attainment of theoretical knowledge, and he firmly believes that the use of reason will lead to human happiness. Socratic rationalism upsets the delicate balance on which tragedy depends, by encouraging people not to strive for wisdom in the face of the necessary unsatisfactoriness of human life, but to attempt to use knowledge to get control of their fate. 'Modern culture' arises in direct continuity out of such Socratism.

The third and final part of the text (§§ 16–25) describes the modern (i.e. late nineteenth century) state of crisis in which we are being forced to realize the limits of our Socratic culture and the high price we have had to pay for it. History, Nietzsche believes, is about to reverse direction and move us backward from the Socratic state to one in which tragedy will once again be possible (§ 19). The main evidence for this is recent (as of 1870) developments in philosophy and music. Schopenhauer and Kant show the limits of rationalism, and music, especially the music of Beethoven, has rediscovered the Dionysiac. Wagner's music-dramas are a first attempt to marry the Dionysiac power of the modern symphony orchestra to Apolline epic speech and action (in the interests of a pessimistic philosophy derived from Schopenhauer). At the end of his life Socrates realized that he had missed out completely on something and tried to 'write music';[4] he failed, but we can and should adopt the ideal of the *musiktreibender Sokrates*, of a figure who can integrate art and knowledge into cultural forms that will make our lives tolerable again.

As mentioned above, *The Birth of Tragedy* was one of the last and most distinguished contributions to a Central European debate about the ills of modern society. This was a debate in which many of the participants, oddly enough, were broadly in agreement on a complex diagnosis of the problem, although, of course, they disagreed on the treatment. The diagnosis was that life in the modern world lacks a kind of unity, coherence, and meaningfulness that life in previous societies possessed. Modern individuals have developed their talents and powers in an overspecialized, one-sided way; their lives and personalities are fragmented, not integrated, and they lack the ability to identify with their society in a natural way and play the role assigned to them in the world wholeheartedly. They cannot see the lives they lead as meaningful and good. Schiller, Hölderlin, Hegel, Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche (and many other lesser-known figures) all accept

[4] Plato, *Phaedo* 60e 5ff.

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versions of this general diagnosis. Theoretical and practical reactions to this perceived problematic state differ enormously. Some (like the later Schiller) thought that what was needed was a new elitist classicism; others (such as Marx) thought that only radical political action directed at changing the basic economic structure of society could deal effectively with the situation. The strand of response to this perceived problem that is most important for the genesis of Nietzsche's views is Romanticism. As Nietzsche himself points out in the introduction to the second edition, *The Birth of Tragedy* is a work of Romanticism. It is concerned with the description of a highly idealized past which is analysed so as to highlight its contrast with and superiority to the 'modern' world, and it ends with a peroration which calls for the utopian construction of a form of society and culture which will break radically with the present and re-embody some of the positively valued features of this past. Earlier Romantics had been obsessed with one or the other of two such idealized past societies. Some gave their allegiance to an idealized antiquity, presenting some version of the the ancient city-state (especially the Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries BC) as the model for a harmonious and satisfying human life; others, and this came to be thought the more characteristically Romantic option, followed the lead of the poet Novalis in praising the purported all-encompassing unity of the Catholic Middle Ages.[5] There are strong elements of both of these views in Wagner, whose ideas about the work of art are strongly informed by his reading of Attic tragedy (especially the *Oresteia)*, but who tends to derive the plot and setting of his music-dramas from the Middle Ages (and who, of course, ends his productive life with the *catholisant Parsifal*). Nietzsche belongs firmly in the first of the two camps.

His version of the story begins by distinguishing his view from what he takes to be the assumptions of prevailing humanist accounts of antiquity. The 'ancient world' was not itself a single unitary phenomenon which deserves unqualified and indiscriminate admiration. Rather there is a robust, creative, and admirable part, 'archaic Greece', the period from Homer to some time in the middle of the fifth century, and then a period of decadence and decline. It is 'archaic Greece' that we should study if we wish to see a model of the best kind of society humans can aspire to.

Archaic Greek society, Nietzsche claims, is different from and superior to the modern world because archaic Greece was an *artistic* culture,

[5] *Cf.* Novalis, 'Christianity or Europe' in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. F. Beiser (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 59ff.

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whereas modern culture is centred on cognition ('science') and 'morality'. The culture of archaic Greece, Nietzsche claims, was not just 'artistic' in that it produced a lot of excellent art, but it was in some sense fundamentally based on and oriented to art, not theoretical science or a formally codified morality. Art was pervasively integrated into all aspects of life and was perceived to be of fundamental significance. Art told the archaic Greeks who they were and how it was best for them to act. Children were taught not biology, geography, mathematics, and a catechism of rules for behaviour (based either on Revelation or on rational argumentation), but athletics, music, dancing, and poetry. The final standards of evaluation and approbation in more or less any area of life were aesthetic. As adults the basic way people argued about what to do was by citing not statistics or scientific theories, but chunks of Homer, Simonides, or Pindar. Homer, in particular, it was thought, must be the universal expert and authority on everything *because* he was the best poet, i.e. was aesthetically superior to all other poets. Plato's Socrates has an uphill battle in many of the dialogues trying to wean his contemporaries from this habit. As Wagner had emphasized, Attic 'tragedy', the most characteristic form of this ancient artistic culture, was not originally a mere 'aesthetic phenomenon' confined to one rather marginal sphere of life, but was rather a highly public event at the very centre of the political, religious, and social life of Athens. The production of tragedies was publicly funded and attendance at the theatre was such an important part of what it was to be an Athenian citizen, in fact, that indigent citizens eventually would have their tickets paid for them, just as they would eventually be paid to attend the Assembly or to serve on juries. The period of greatest dramatic creativity in Athens was also the period during which Athens held hegemony over the so-called 'Delian League'. The League was a military alliance originally directed against the Persian empire, which, however, eventually became in effect an Athenian empire. Most of the 'allied' members of the League were forced to pay assessed contributions which were used for the upkeep of the Athenian fleet and for public works (such as building the Parthenon) in Athens. The poet Sophocles, we know, in addition to writing tragedies, also served on the board of generals and was one of the overseers entrusted with collecting the contributions from the allies. On the day on which the main dramatic festival began, then, all the citizens (ideally) and representatives of the 'allies' assembled in the theatre in front of the altar to Dionysos which stood in the centre of the theatre and observed the sacrifices which were

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offered to the god, including a sacrifice by the generals. Then the 'tribute' from the 'allies' was carried across the stage to be stored in the Athenian temples that served as treasuries. Finally the dramatic competition proper could begin.

To the contemporary reader it seems odd that Nietzsche, who, following Wagner, emphasizes so strongly the role tragedy played in unifying Athenian culture, has nothing to say about any possible connection between artistic achievement and that archetypically Athenian institution, democracy. Apoliticism was not a necessary part of Romanticism. Indeed some of the early Romantics (the two Schlegels) had been keen republicans – Nietzsche criticizes them on just this account in *The Birth of Tragedy* (see below pp. 36–7). The Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, modelled on Wagner's ideas about Attic tragedy, was to be an institution of spiritual *and* political regeneration. It was, of course, not uncommon in the humanistic tradition at the end of which Nietzsche stands to admire Athens *despite* its 'democratic' institutions (and in earlier and more pervasively Christian periods, also *despite* its paganism). Nietzsche's utter contempt for 'democracy' seems to be one of the most basic features of his intellectual and psychological make-up. It certainly antedated the development of any of his characteristic philosophic views. He is said to have resigned from a student fraternity because he disapproved of its excessively democratic admissions policies. It is true that virtually no one in the nineteenth century would have thought of 'democracy' in the way that has become customary here in Western Europe at the end of the twentieth century, as self-evidently the only justifiable form of political organization,[6] but even by the standards of his period Nietzsche's political views were not enlightened. Wagner's political reputation has been tarnished by his anti-Semitism, by his later accommodation to the political powers-that-be in Germany – he would do almost anything, even kowtow to Bismarck (not to mention King Ludwig of Bavaria), to get his Festspielhaus built – and by the attractiveness of his aesthetics to the National Socialists. He was also first and foremost a creative artist who, although intellectually extremely active and sometimes insightful, was not always terribly clear or consistent in the general ideas he held. Left Hegelian, anarchist, republican, pacifist, 'communist', nationalist, and various other kinds of political ideas jostled one another in his mind without apparently disturbing him too much. Still, he remained

[6] *Cf.* John Dunn, 'Conclusion' to *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey*, ed. John Dunn (Oxford University Press, 1992).

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committed until the end of his life to the idea of a total revolution (i.e. a cultural *and* political revolution) which would abolish the state and introduce a form of radical social egalitarianism. The Festspielhaus itself in Bayreuth embodies Wagner's egalitarian ideal architecturally in the complete absence of separate boxes or special loges where members of an elite could segregate themselves from the other members of the audience: as in an ancient theatre, there are just plain rows of identical benches with each member of the audience the equal of each other, just as (ideally) among the citizens of the ancient democracies. This is the direct architectural denial of one of Nietzsche's central ideas, that of *Rangordnung,* of 'rank-ordering'.

Although politics is absent from the text as we now have it (apart from the odd *obiter dictum*), a sustained discussion of politics was an integral part of the original series of overlapping projects that eventually became *The Birth of Tragedy*. Thus the essay that has come to be known as *The Greek State* was originally part of an early draft of *The Birth of Tragedy*,[7] and Nietzsche must have made a conscious decision to exclude it from the published version. In this essay Nietzsche expresses his early political views with great clarity and force. In contrast to Wagner's view (as expressed in his *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*) that the artistic culture of ancient Greece could not be revived because it *deserved* to perish – founded as it was on slavery – and that a fully satisfactory work of art '*of the future*' could belong only to a society that had abolished not only chattel-slavery but its modern equivalent, the wage-slavery characteristic of capitalist societies, Nietzsche asserts that slavery is an essential feature of any society that aspires to high cultural attainments. He does seem to think it is rather a shame that this is the case, but he never suggests that the price is not worth paying.

'Modern culture', in the sense of that term Nietzsche insists on using, starts in mid-fifth-century Athens with Socrates. It is essentially theoretical or scientific in that it assumes that *knowledge* (not custom or the most aesthetically pleasing words of the best poets) should be our guide in life. The good man (and, on Socrates' reading of it, this means the man who was leading a good life) was the man who had a certain kind of knowledge. To be sure, the 'knowledge' the real historical Socrates sought (as far as we can tell, which is not very far, since the historical Socrates notoriously wrote nothing) is not exactly scientific knowledge, certainly not in the sense that term had come to have by the end of the nineteenth century; it is a kind

[7] Reprinted in Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by K. Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 176ff.

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of 'moral knowledge', but Nietzsche assumes that there is a distinct, important, historically continuous line of development from the Socratic quest to the nineteenth-century ideal of the pursuit of objective, scientific knowledge for its own sake. This part of his view is not worked out in any great detail, but Nietzsche clearly holds that it is appropriate to call 'modern' nineteenth-century culture 'Socratic' in the wider sense of being essentially devoted to the pursuit and application of propositionally articulated 'theoretical knowledge' and incapable of conceiving that anything else could be an appropriate guide for how to live. Such Socratism, Nietzsche argues, is a fundamentally optimistic view, and that brings us to the second of the two sets of issues *The Birth of Tragedy* addresses, the question whether life is worth living (and if so for what reasons).

Plato's Socrates explicitly holds that no ill can befall a good man, a man with the appropriate kind of knowledge, and that this knowledge is accessible to humans (through 'dialectic', the give-and-take of argument in the attempt to discover formal definitions of human 'excellence'), and the nineteenth century is unreflectively convinced that the accumulation of scientific knowledge will lead to increased human happiness. Christianity too can be seen as contributing a separate strand to the genesis of the characteristically modern form of optimism:[8] the world is finally created by an omnipotent and all-benevolent God who will take care that in the larger scheme of things all is for the best. It is one of Nietzsche's major claims in *The Birth of Tragedy* that archaic Greece did not share this optimism about knowledge, the Christian metaphysical optimism about the final nature of the universe, or indeed optimism in any form. The archaic equivalent of the biblical claim that God looked on the world and saw that it was good (or the Socratic claim that no harm can ever befall the good man) is the wisdom of Silenus that never to have been is the best state of all for humans. This 'wisdom' was *not* necessarily expressed in propositional form – it was a kind of non-theoretical, non-discursive knowledge, as Aeschylus puts

[8] In the Preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche claims that the absence of any extended discussion of Christianity in the first edition is a sign that even then he was a committed anti-Christian. This is pretty clearly another instance of Nietzsche's attempt to project views he later developed back on to his early work. To the extent to which there is any reference at all to Christianity in *The Birth of Tragedy* it takes the form of a discussion of the *Dionysiac* standing of at least one strand of Christianity (§ 23, cf. § 17 very end, § 12). In later writings Nietzsche goes out of his way to emphasize that Christianity is a historically composite phenomenon comprising a number of different strands. So there may be a Dionysiac Christian religiosity (speaking in tongues in the early church), and also a more rationalist version of Christianity (Leibniz). In the following discussion 'Christianity' means the kind of Christianity of the roughly 'rationalist' theological tradition (including Aquinas).

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it in *Agamemnon* (line 177) a 'pathei mathos', a knowing in and through experiencing/suffering, a knowing embodied perhaps tacitly in one's attitudes and behaviour even if one never formulated it clearly (although, as we have seen, various archaic thinkers *did* formulate it explicitly). The very fact that the Athenians organized so much of their political, social, and religious life around a ritualized representation of catastrophic destruction (i.e. tragedy) shows that they must in some sense have been metaphysical pessimists. How else, Nietzsche argues, could one explain the keen, addictive pleasure the Athenians and, following them, many others through the ages have taken in watching a basically admirable, heroic individual destroy himself in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, as Oedipus does?

One possibility, of course, is to attribute to the Athenians (and to us) some kind of deep-seated sadism – we just, in fact, take such pleasure in making other people suffer that we even enjoy artistic representations of other people's sufferings. The later Nietzsche does propose versions of this view,[9] but in *The Birth of Tragedy* he gives a rather more complex account. People enjoy watching tragedy because they in some sense understand that in watching this ritual self-destruction they are gaining insight into the fundamental human condition (perhaps into the very nature of reality), i.e. because they recognize that Oedipus' fate is *the human fate*, and in particular in some sense *their own fate.* People in some sense take pleasure in knowing this truth. Since, however, this kind of knowledge of the truth is useless in helping them avoid their inevitable fate (death and dissolution), this is a masochistic form of knowledge. The situation, however, is even more complex, because while dissolution of our identity and individuality is in one sense what we fear most, it is *also* potentially the highest and most intense kind of pleasure (Isolde's 'unbewußt / höchste Lust'). Presumably the pleasure results from the fact that in losing our individuality we are (if Schopenhauer is right) returning to our original state, a state which is metaphysically speaking what we always *really* were. Getting back to that fundamentally natural state, after the brief sojourn in the illusory world of 'individuality', is experienced as pleasurable. We take pleasure in watching Oedipus' demise because deep down we know we would experience our *own* dissolution as deeply pleasurable (and also horrible). The pleasure we experience in various mundane orgiastic experiences when the sense of separate, differentiated self is lost is a vague analogue of the real pleasure (and horror) of genuine self-dissolution. Finally, just as dissolution of

[9] *Cf. Beyond Good and Evil* § 229f; *Genealogy of Morality*, II. § 7.

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identity is both horrible and pleasurable, so equally knowledge that our identity is an illusion doomed imminently to be dissolved is both attractive – which explains partly the appeal of tragedy – and repulsive. In fact, Nietzsche claims, full, undiluted knowledge of the metaphysical truth about the world would be strictly intolerable to humans; it would produce in us a nausea in the face of existence that would literally kill us. The paradoxical duality in tragedy (pain and pleasure:'unbewußt / höchste Lust') mirrors an underlying metaphysical paradox: what we take to be most real about ourselves, our very individuation as separate beings, is nothing but an illusory appearance generated by a non-individuated metaphysical entity (the Will). This is what makes tragedy the highest form of art, and, as such, 'the true *metaphysical* activity' ('An attempt at self-criticism' § 5; *cf.* also 'Foreword to Richard Wagner').

Oedipus' fate, then, is a paradigm instance of what it is to be human and a good artistic representation of a basic metaphysical feature of the universe. First of all, the social identity which Oedipus believes is his and which he takes to be robust and firmly founded – that he is the all-knowing, omnicompetent saviour of Thebes – shows itself in the course of the drama to have been an illusion which gradually is dissolved. This is an artistic expression of the basic metaphysical truth that our prized individuality, even our very spatio-temporal distinctness itself, is only a momentary illusion. Second, Oedipus is shown to be untiring in his attempts to discover the truth, but discovery of that truth does him (and Thebes) ultimately no good at all. By answering the riddle of the Sphinx, he frees the city from her depredations, but the end result of this is the plague with which the tragedy opens. Application of human intelligence has merely replaced one evil with another. The truth about himself, which Oedipus pursues so keenly throughout most of the play, is utterly intolerable to him when he attains it – that is why he blinds himself. That knowledge itself is, as Nietzsche puts it, an 'enormous offence against nature' (§ 9) which nature itself will avenge is the basic mythic truth which tragedy transmits and Oedipus instantiates. This is what makes tragedy literally incomprehensible to the optimistic Socrates with his faith in 'knowledge'.

Even if, however, this cognitive account of tragedy explains why the Athenians were addicted to it, it does not answer the further question. If the knowledge of reality *is* really so terrible that no one can tolerate it, how can the audience in a tragedy survive a performance? The answer is that tragedy transmits the basic pessimistic truth about the world and human

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life while at the same time enveloping it with an illusory appearance which makes it (just barely) tolerable.

Tragedy originally arises, Nietzsche claims, from the dancing and music-making of a frenzied chorus in the grip of a Dionysiac 'intoxication' (*Rausch*). Collective music-making is the form of art that brings us as close as it is possible for us to come to the experience of the basic truth that our individual identity is an illusion. Pure, unadulterated Dionysiac music, however, is so close to the basic reality of the world that it is dangerous. No one, Nietzsche suggests (falsely, no doubt, but that is another matter), could really survive a simple *listening* to (the Dionysiac truth embodied in) the music to the third act of *Tristan* without the words and staging.

Fully formed tragedy has come into existence when words and stage-action are added to the collective, orgiastic music-making of the chorus. The words and the stage-action as it were deflect and dilute the impact of that reality, making it tolerable to humans. They do this by constructing a realm of what Nietzsche calls *Schein*, i.e. of appearance or semblance.

Tragedy is a constructed realm of *Schein* in two senses. First, the actor on stage is not really the mythic king of Thebes, Oedipus (although he in some sense 'seems' to be), but some Athenian citizen in a mask. One has failed to experience the tragedy if one sees only one's friend and fellow actor up there on the stage parading around in an odd mask. One has also failed if one thinks that it *really is* Oedipus up there, that the blood dripping down from his eyes is real blood, etc.

In a second sense, the words and action in tragedy generate a *Schein* in that they seem to individuate what is happening and give the audience distance from it. What is actually happening in the performance of a tragedy is that each member of the audience is being confronted with a general, but existentially pertinent, truth about what human life is and must be (namely one form of catastrophe or another), but the appearance is created that what is happening on stage is happening to some particular *other* individual, to Oedipus, or Tristan (not to you, the individual member of the audience).

When Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* is torn limb from limb by his mother and her friends, presumbly this is already a version *ad usum delphini* of Dionysiac experiences that were even more savage and pleasurable, but which few of the participants survived. This is not yet the deepest form of Dionysiac experience because it is 'already' corrupted and distorted by the principle of individuation, i.e. the pleasure and pain are represented as

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distributed to *different* individuals at *different* times: physical pain to Pentheus, physical pleasure at one point in time to his mother, but then at a later time distress. The genuine aboriginal Dionysiac experience would be most intense pleasure and most intense pain at the same time and in the same person (or rather in the same collectivity with no distinction of person). So again the best example would be if Isolde at the end of *Tristan* were to sing her part without words, as a kind of *vocalise*, in a performance without a separate audience, apart from the musicians, and the collectivity composed of Isolde and the members of the orchestra expired at the end in a paroxysm of self-inflicted intolerable pleasure-and-pain.

The production of individuated *Schein* is the work of 'Apollo'and it is this work that allows the spectators to survive. Tragedy requires the co-operation of Dionysos with Apollo, of music *and* words. Pure or absolute Dionysiac music (which would have to be purely instrumental music with no accompanying words) would be too direct an expression of this truth; we survive a Wagnerian music-drama (as the ancient Athenians had survived an Aeschylean tragedy) only because of the illusions Apollo creates. Success in tragedy consists in combining appropriately the most deeply Dionysiac music with the most highly articulated and pleasing Apolline illusions. Great tragedy can be a central part of a culture only if the members of that culture are psychically vital and robust enough to tolerate engagement with the truth which tragedy transmits.

Socrates correctly diagnoses tragedy as a purveyor of *Schein*, but fails utterly to see the point of this *Schein*. Part of the reason for this, Nietzsche thinks, is that Socrates is a deeply abnormal, unhealthy man, a man of stunted and perverted instincts and a diseased intellect that has run wild. His abnormality take the form of a kind of hyperintellectualized simple-mindedness. When he looks at tragedy, he fails to see it as an instance of a kind of self-sufficient *Schein* which confronts us with a deep truth about life, and thinks it is *just* a simple lie/illusion. That is not to say that Socratism is not itself a tissue of illusions. 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense' is precisely an extended analysis of the various 'illusions' Nietzsche thinks inherently constitutive of the Socratic way of life. Socrates, Nietzsche thinks, is committed not just to the self-evidently false beliefs that no harm can befall the good man, and that no one does 'wrong' willingly, but also to the equally false view that concepts can tell us something about the essence of the world, that the world is composed of identical cases that can be correctly subsumed under general concepts, and so on.

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The human situation, then, is dire indeed if tragedy is an illusion, and the only alternatives to it – Socratism or Christianity – are equally illusions. In fact, according to Nietzsche, the only choice we have is (one or another kind of) illusion *or* death. That is one way of expressing what it means to say that Nietzsche's view is pessimistic. If this is the case, though, what reason can we have to prefer the illusions of a tragic culture to the illusions of Socratism? Why should we bother actively to seek tragedies out? Why should *we* (late-nineteenth-century Central Europeans) try to build theatres to expose ourselves to these illusions? Why should we try to construct a new 'tragic' culture?

There are several interconnected reasons for preferring tragic to Socratic illusions. First, Socratic illusions and the form of life associated with them are not finally stable. In the end even Socrates himself felt the need for 'music',[10] and this will be the fate of every Socratic culture. The history of philosophy also shows a natural development from Socrates to the insight attained in Kant (according to Nietzsche) and Schopenhauer that the everyday world investigated by the scientific optimist is a mere illusion and that one must look beyond it (to Kantian 'faith' or Schopenhauer's pessimism) for any final human meaning. Second, although both tragedy and Socratism are 'illusions', *Schein* (in *one* sense of that highly equivocal term), Nietzsche believes that some kinds of *Schein* can be closer to the truth than others. This is one of Nietzsche's more interesting ideas and it is a shame that he never develops it in any detail. Tragedy, in any case, Nietzsche clearly thinks, is closer to the truth than Socratic 'illusions' are. Finally, Socratic illusions just are not as inherently satisfying as the illusions of a full tragic culture.

That brings us to the second of the two main topics of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Clearly the book is intended as a contribution to philosophical theodicy. The text states several times that 'only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world be justified'.[11] The task of giving a theodicy in the Western theological tradition was that of trying to show argumentatively that the world, despite appearances to the contrary, really was in essence good, and not just 'good' in some very abstract sense, but good *for us*. By showing this, philosophers thought they could vindicate the claim that human life was potentially worthwhile for those living it, and thus that it was rational for us to adopt a fundamentally optimistic attitude toward our respective lives and toward the world as a whole. The history of

[10] *Cf.* above, footnote 4. [11] § 5, *cf.* 3, 'An attempt at self-criticism' § 5.

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philosophical theodicies in the West is long and convoluted, and I will mention only two of the various approaches that have been taken. One historically important strand of argument depends on the claim that the existence of evil is a logically necessary concomitant of the existence of free human choice, and the existence of such free choice is an overriding good. Since whatever evil exists in the world is there for the sake of the realization of the overwhelming good of human freedom, it makes sense to see the world as a whole as good. Another approach claims that the world as a whole was created by a rational god attempting to maximize the number and variety of created beings in the most parsimonious way. This project, it is claimed, is inherently rational and good, and what we call 'evil' can be shown to be a necessary, but subordinate, or merely local aspect of it.

Most of these traditional arguments presuppose the existence of an omnipotent god who created the world as a whole according to a rational plan and who cares for the good of each individual person, and they argue from that to the view that the existence of evil in the world is *compatible with* having an optimistic attitude toward the world as a whole and human life. So 'theodicy' can be a useful exercise for people who *already* have the appropriate religious belief in the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent creator of the world, but Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* is adopting a post-Christian view which does not assume such a religious belief.

The claim that the world can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon is to be read in two ways, negatively and positively. First of all it asserts that none of the traditional ways of justifying existence by reference to formal rationality, the exigencies of freedom of the will, or principles such as parsimony, efficiency, plenitude of being etc. works. Second, it asserts positively that one way of justifying the world (or 'life' or whatever) *does* work, namely contemplation of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. This presumably means that each feature of the world is justified because *that* feature is one the world must have if it is to present an aesthetically pleasing spectacle (or perhaps, *the* most aesthetically pleasing spectacle) to an appropriately sophisticated observer. The first thing to notice is that the very term ' justification' (*Rechtfertigung*) might be thought to belong to the Socratic sphere which it is purportedly the whole intention of *The Birth of Tragedy* to undercut, because the most normal way (at least now) to take it is as a request for some kind of general theoretically based discursive structure. One could, of course, use 'justify' in a more general sense to mean simply 'to cause to seem to be worthwhile or good'. One must be careful

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not to go too far down this road, because getting drunk or taking various drugs can be a very effective way for me to be caused to come to see the world as good or various activities as 'worthwhile', but it is not clear that this is a model for 'justification' in any interesting sense. The question is whether there is something between sheer *Rausch* on the one hand, and Socratic argumentation on the other. Nietzsche claims that art is located precisely there and that may well be right, but it is not clear how we can get clarity about where this 'there' is. To give too discursive an account would be self-defeating. Perhaps that is part of the reason for the dithyrambic style of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Nietzsche's comment in the Preface to the second edition ('An attempt at self-criticism' § 3) that he ought to have expressed himself by singing rather than by speaking in prose is perhaps more than just a joke (although, given what we know about Nietzsche's abilities as a composer, we should probably be very pleased we have the text we do).

In addition, if *The Birth of Tragedy* is to be a satisfactory aesthetic theodicy we need to know who is making the basic aesthetic judgment on which the theodicy rests. The answer to this question is not as obvious as it might seem, because in the main text Nietzsche uses as his example of an aesthetic theodicy the 'Homeric' view that the world is justified *because* it presents an engaging aesthetic spectacle *to* the Olympian gods (§ 5). When Nietzsche later refers to *The Birth of Tragedy* as containing an 'artiste's metaphysics' ('Attempt at self-criticism' § 2) I think he has in mind a metaphysics which is a secularized descendant of this 'Homeric' view. The non-individuated reality behind all appearances, what Nietzsche calls *das Ur-Eine* ('the primordially One') (*passim*), is itself a kind of artist. In an image taken over from Heraclitus (fragment 52 [Diels–Kranz]; *The Birth of Tragedy* § 24; *GM* II.16) Nietzsche writes that this primordial unity is like a child playing in the sand on the beach, wantonly and haphazardly creating individuated shapes and forms and then destroying them, taking equal pleasure in *both* parts of the process, in both creation (Apollo) and destruction (Dionysos). Our world is nothing but a momentary configuration of shapes in the sand. The child's play does not in any significant sense follow 'rational' principles and has no purpose beyond itself. It is 'innocent' and ' beyond good and evil' (to use Nietzsche's own later expression). The only sense that can be made of the whole activity is whatever aesthetic sense it makes for the child to create or erase one form rather than another. From the fact, though, that the world presents a pleasing aesthetic

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spectacle to certain gods (especially to the wanton Heraclitean child), and is in *this* sense 'justified', it does not obviously follow that *I* will find *my* life worth living, especially if my role in the spectacle is that of victim, and even more so if there are cogent philosophical arguments, such as one finds in the work of Schopenhauer, to the effect that the *only* kind of role available for a human is that of one or another kind of victimization or frustration. The world and life may come to *seem* 'justified' for us to the extent to which we, through various aesthetic experiences, can come close to identifying ourselves in the primordial child and seeing the beauty of the play. Successful (great) tragedy may allow us that momentary identification and vision, but that identification is nonetheless in one important sense an illusion. In *one* sense the child who in metaphysical play creates and destroys the world is our underlying reality (because it is the underlying reality of everything), but in the usual sense of 'identical' we are not 'identical' with that child, 'we' are one of the insubstantial shapes with which it plays.

The important difference between Nietzsche's 'theodicy' and previous Christian ones is that *he* will come increasingly to distinguish three separate things which views like traditional Christianity connect: theodicy ('the world is justified'), optimism ('our life can be worth living') and affirmation. Affirmation is not exactly the same thing as optimism (at least as traditionally understood), if only because it is usually assumed that an 'optimistic' position is one that claims that we can see our lives as they really are, *without* illusions, and still find them worthwhile. Nietzsche, however, thinks that this is not possible for us. However beautiful the play from the point of view of *das Ur-Eine*, *we* are momentary illusory shapes doomed to the ineluctable frustration of the desires we necessarily have, and we cannot even tolerate the knowledge that this is our situation. Metaphysically, then, pessimism is true; what Nietzsche wishes to investigate is whether affirmation in any sense is possible under these circumstances, and he seems to find that possibility embodied in tragedy.

Paradoxically, if Dionysos and Apollo are successfully brought into alliance in a given tragedy, the result will be a transformation of 'pessimism' – not into optimism, to be sure, but into a kind of affirmation; that is, the *Schein* that arises will not sap the audience's strength, paralyse its will or lead to demoralization, but rather will energize the members of the audience to go on living. To be more exact, it requires great strength to produce and appreciate tragedy because it takes us so close to the basic horror of things, but if one can tolerate this, the result is an increase rather than a

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decrease in one's ability to live vividly (and create further great art – Nietzsche seems sometimes rather to confuse these two).

That tragedy can have this life-enhancing effect is one of the things that permits Nietzsche later (in the 1880s when he writes the Preface to the second edition) to claim that in *The Birth of Tragedy* he had *already* moved beyond Schopenhauer and away from pessimism in the strict sense. It is not hard to see how Nietzsche could have thought this. To admit the existence of a life-enhancing form of pessimism (if such a form did exist) would seem to mean at least that 'pessimism' must be a much more highly ambiguous phenomenon than had previously been thought.

Nietzsche's views on pessimism and its modalities shifted significantly from the early 1870s to the mid-1880s. In the earlier period he is still attempting to assimilate archaic Greece more or less straightforwardly to Schopenhauer, and is satisfied to point out that *both* Schopenhauer and Aeschylus (purportedly) are 'pessimistic' (compared with the optimism of Christianity and the modern belief in science, progress etc.). Later (for instance, in *Human, All Too Human*) he comes to claim that the whole discussion of optimism or pessimism as basic attitudes towards the world makes sense only if one assumes an outmoded theological view of the world. So presumably we should try to adopt a form of life that was 'beyond optimism and pessimism', one which we did not find it necessary to interpret in terms of either of these two concepts. Still later (in the Preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* and other writings) he seems to find his way back again to a more complex understanding of the problems associated with 'pessimism'. He claims to find the unitary notion of 'pessimism' (which he had used in the main text of *The Birth of Tragedy*) over-simple, and he distinguishes between different types of pessimism – a pessimism of weakness (Schopenhauer), and a pessimism of strength (archaic Greece). The archaic Greeks are 'pessimists', but 'pessimists of strength', *not*, as Nietzsche claims in the main body of *The Birth of Tragedy*, pessimists in the sense in which Schopenhauer is a pessimist (and what Nietzsche now calls 'pessimism of weakness'). That is, he seems to think that what is finally significant in a philosophy is whether or not it contributes to an affirmation of this world, and that one can in some sense distinguish issues of pessimism/optimism from issues concerning affirmation or negation of *this* world, our world of everyday life. Since both Schopenhauer and Christianity agree that *this* world is not to be affirmed, they are really instances of the same kind of weakness, and the difference

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in their metaphysical views (that the Christian thinks the underlying *reality* of the world, God, is to be affirmed while Schopenhauer thinks this underlying reality, the Will, is to be negated) is irrelevant.

How exactly are we to construct a new tragic culture? Obviously part of the project will be to get rid of the various forms of optimism that cloud our vision, primarily Christianity and the nineteenth-century 'scientific world view'. The image of the *musiktreibender Sokrates* that dominates the latter parts of *The Birth of Tragedy* might be taken as suggesting that the new tragic world view will not just turn its back completely on the existing 'theoretical culture', but will pass through it, assimilate it completely, and emerge, as it were, beyond on the other side of it. How exactly Wagner and Ranke can be brought together, though, is not completely clear.[12] Perhaps in the new tragic culture people will *know* theoretically, in the way Schopenhauer claims to 'know', that our situation in the world is ultimately hopeless. We will *know* in a grounded way that our choice is illusion or death and will still choose life-invigorating illusions. In this we will differ from the ancients. Apolline art in the ancient world was not a reasoned and theoretically grounded response to the inherent worthlessness of our lives, but an instinctive reaction of exceptionally vital people. We will be able to choose *Schein* knowing in the fullest sense that it is *Schein*.

The relation of a work of philosophical speculation, like *The Birth of Tragedy*, to empirical scholarship is complex. Greece is important in the work primarily because of the tacit assumption that it is the paradigmatic artistic culture, and thus that it will exhibit in an especially transparent way the articulations one will need to grasp in order to understand just what a successful artistic culture would be like. So the *The Birth of Tragedy* could in principle contain a certain number of factual errors, idiosyncratic interpretations, empirically unsupported hypotheses, and wilful conflation of things that do not perhaps really belong together – as, in fact, it does – without losing its value completely. At a certain point, of course, if the number of errors or of unsupported speculative claims became too great, the whole project would collapse, although even then it would not be completely clear that the problem lay in Nietzsche's theory of the three factors in every culture (the Dionysiac, the Apolline, and the Socratic); it might

[12] In one of the fragmentary notes Nietzsche wrote while working on the preliminary sketches of *The Birth of Tragedy* he claims that Shakespeare is the 'musiktreibender Sokrates' (*Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967ff. 7(131)), but, apart from half a dozen other fragments, he never develops this line of thought any further.

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just be that Greece was not as good an instance of a (tragic) culture as we had thought.

Nietzsche's hopes for *The Birth of Tragedy* seem to have been both very exaggerated and very naive. He expected the work to be received with enthusiasm by all young Germans eager for cultural renewal, especially Wagnerians, but he also expected that the more open-minded members of the academic community of philologists would recognize the work as a pathbreaking new way of studying the ancient world. The second of these hopes was very quickly and thoroughly dashed. An initial review by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff was harshly critical, indeed dismissive of Nietzsche's whole project. Apart from various points of detail, Wilamowitz correctly diagnosed and categorically rejected Nietzsche's attempt to do 'philology' in a way that would make it more like philosophy or art than like a strict 'wissenschaft';[13] the proper mode of access to the ancient world, Wilamowitz asserted, was through the painstaking study of history 'in der askese selbstverläugnender arbeit', not through the mystic insights used in *The Birth of Tragedy.* It is of course perfectly true that, given the choice, Nietzsche would prefer *Weisheit* to *Wissenschaft*, so there was no real response he could make to that basic charge. Nietzsche also hoped for at least understanding, and perhaps some more tangible support, from his former teacher and patron Ritschl. Ritschl, after all, had been the person who had obtained for him his unprecedented university appointment in Basle, and, as editor of an influential journal, had been responsible for the publication of Nietzsche's early philological papers, but Ritschl agreed with Wilamowitz in his judgment of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and privately expressed regret that Nietzsche had wandered off the track from his very promising historical research into a fantastic world of religiously inspired enthusiasms. The review of *The Birth of Tragedy* was Wilamowitz's first publication, but he went on to become by far the most significant German classical philologist of the turn of the century, so his condemnation continued to be extremely influential, and Nietzsche's work was not an object of serious consideration in academic philological circles in Germany for 40 years or so. *The Birth of Tragedy* did not succeed in reforming German philology, in changing the way it was done.

With Wagnerians Nietzsche had better luck. Wagner himself was thrilled – not surprisingly, since many of the most central thoughts in *The*

[13] When Wilamowitz wrote his criticism of *The Birth of Tragedy* he was a supporter of one of the movements for reform of German orthography, so, contrary to current practice, he used lower-case for the initial letter of nouns.

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Birth of Tragedy are culled from Wagner's own earlier writings or from Wagner's idol Schopenhauer and the book as a whole could easily have carried as its motto: 'Only as a Wagnerian is life worth living (to the extent to which it can be said to be worth living at all).' With the wider public, too, Nietzsche's work slowly established itself, starting in the 1890s, and eventually became so pervasively influential that the history of its reception in twentieth-century culture is too rich and complex to recount here even in outline.

It might seem odd that one of the most influential modern books on Greek tragedy was written by a person who had little real, continuing interest in drama, if the same thing were not also true of the ancient world: Aristotle, to judge by the existing evidence, turned a much keener eye to the reproductive organs of sea-creatures than to the fate of tragedy. If one looks at Nietzsche's life as a whole there are topics to which he returns again and again obsessively. These include the psychology of religion – his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé was right to emphasize this as a central concern – the nature of philosophy (especially as embodied in the person of Socrates), music and musicians (especially Wagner as the archetypical musician), and some general issues about how to understand the 'vitality' of cultures; they do not include drama or tragedy. Ancient tragedy became of special importance to him for a very brief moment under the spell of Wagner. As he wrote in the letter to Wagner to accompany the presentation copy of *The Birth of Tragedy* (2 January 1872) , the object of the book was to show that Wagner's art was 'eternally in the right' ('daß *Sie* mit *Ihrer Kunst* in Ewigkeit recht haben müssen'). To put it bluntly, Nietzsche found tragedy especially interesting for as long as he thought it a form of the self-evidently most important and inherently significant cultural phenomenon there was – *music* – and he thought tragedy was essentially music to a large extent because Wagner said so. Wagner, in turn, said so because this was his way of asserting the superiority of his own music-drama *as music* over the purely instrumental music of Beethoven and others. To make the construction work, Nietzsche needed the highly implausible thesis that the highest form of music *must* transform itself into sung words if it is to remain humanly tolerable. Once this claim was dropped there was no reason to give pride of place to drama. Nietzsche's fascination with music (and with the psychology of religion) could take more direct and appropriate forms, and tragedy could leave centre-stage and return to the dusty corners of his consciousness. The subtitle added to the second edition (*Hellenism and*

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Pessimism) connects Nietzsche's first published book more perspicuously with his continuing philosophical concerns than the original title does.

The idea specifically derived from *The Birth of Tragedy* which has become perhaps most influential in the twentieth century is the conception of the 'Dionysiac' and its role in human life, i.e. the view that destructive, primitively anarchic forces are a part of us (not to be projected into some diabolical Other), and that the pleasure we take in them is real and not to be denied. These impulses cannot simply be ignored, eliminated, repressed, or fully controlled. As Euripides' *Bacchae* shows, they will have their due one way or another and failure to recognize them is just a way of, eventually, giving them free rein to express themselves with special force, destructiveness, and irrationality. In some sense higher culture rests on coming to terms with them, but that does not mean simply letting them play themselves out in a direct and unmodified way. The primitive Dionysiac orgy is *not* an Attic tragedy, and not a form of 'higher culture' at all in this sense, although tragedy is in some sense a development of the orgy. The construction of a higher culture requires *both* a sympathetic recognition of the existence of the Dionysiac *and* an integration of it into an alliance with what Nietzsche calls 'Apollo' and what he calls 'the *daimonion* of Socrates'. Different cultures are different ways of negotiating and renegotiating the terms of this 'alliance', probably a never-ending process.

Reading the later Nietzsche has caused us to be very justifiably suspicious about uncritical use of the concept of progress, but the attempt in the modern world to assimilate or at least to face up to Nietzsche's early views about the Dionysiac seems to me to be not just another instance of the random motion of history, but an undeniably progressive development, difficult as it is to specify exactly what is meant by that. If philosophy, as Nietzsche himself thought, is essentially a matter of asking important questions that no one else had thought to ask, then to have begun to ask the questions he did in *The Birth of Tragedy* is a mark of Nietzsche's significance as a philosopher.

Raymond Geuss

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