Introduction

Dionysus after Nietzsche

Prologue: Dionysus in Basel and Turin (1872/1889)

The story of Dionysus after Nietzsche begins on 2 January 1872 in the Swiss city of Basel, where Friedrich Nietzsche received his first copy of The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music (Die Geburt der Tragödie, aus dem Geiste der Musik), freshly printed and sent straight from the publishers. The completion of this book represented a milestone in Nietzsche’s early, though to this point spectacularly successful, philological career. Nietzsche’s fascination with the ancient world had first been kindled during his time at Schulpforta (1858–1864), a prestigious Gymnasium near his hometown of Naumburg that was famous for its focus on the Latin and Greek languages. When deciding upon his university studies, Nietzsche initially chose to study theology in Bonn but quickly changed his mind, switching course on arrival to study philology. He then moved to Leipzig in the autumn of 1865 to follow his favourite professor, the Latinist Friedrich Ritschl, who had left Bonn after an argument with a colleague. As a result of Ritschl’s high opinion (Ritschl had described his young protégé as a ‘phenomenon’ in a reference), Nietzsche was appointed Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basel in 1869 at the age of twenty-four, without Habilitation and on the strength of his already numerous publications on ancient authors including Simonides, Diogenes Laertius and Theognis.

The stage was set for Nietzsche to establish his burgeoning reputation, and given his pedigree the situation must have seemed auspicious.

1 It was sent from Leipzig where its publisher E. W. Fritzsch was based; see Schaberg 1993: 23–8.
Nietzsche had laboured hard in the run-up to the Christmas of 1871 to make sure that *The Birth of Tragedy* was ready for publication, refusing to spend the holiday with friends or relatives. He had been particularly assiduous in designing and overseeing the creation of a woodcut of the ancient Greek mythical figure Prometheus to serve as the work’s frontispiece. After unwrapping the final product, he wrote quickly to Erwin Rohde, his best friend at the time and a classicist at the University of Kiel, to find out if he had received his copy yet. After declaring how pleased he was with the image of Prometheus (and how much it had pleased the cultural historian Jakob Burckhardt, his colleague at Basel), the young writer described his feelings at handling the physical results of his efforts: ‘It was a special moment when I received the first copy today. I’ve constantly got these words on my lips: my creation, the work of my own hands, good God, I’ve done it!’ Nietzsche signed off hurriedly, thanking Rohde for his devoted friendship and wishing him a happy New Year. As his book attracted further readers and inspired more detailed responses, its author would become more and more dependent on the kindness of this friend; but, for now, he was satisfied with only a short letter, simply wishing to express the pride he felt in his creation. This letter represents Nietzsche’s first recorded response to *The Birth of Tragedy*; as the year went on, however, Nietzsche quickly came to realise that his early excitement about the work was not universally shared, and especially not by his fellow classicists. Most responded with embarrassed silence: it took a month, and some anxious prompting by Nietzsche, for even Ritschl to offer his own (quietly damning) comments on the book. The most viciously critical response from the discipline of Classics came from the pen of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1848–1931), published in late January 1872. Wilamowitz was a rival young classicist and fellow product of Schulpforta, and the climax of his review, entitled ‘The Music of the Future’ (*Zukunftsmusik*), which had been coined by the German composer Richard Wagner, and to draw attention to Wagner’s extensive influence on Nietzsche’s writings. See further Porter 2011 and Reich 2013: 28–274 for a comprehensive collection of the responses to *The Birth of Tragedy*. 

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4 See Brandt 1991, Ruehl 2003 and Lecznar 2013 for the significance of this frontispiece.

5 See Nietzsche 1977a: 270, translation mine. See further Heidegger 1985: 274 for a reference to this letter in his Nietzsche lectures (more on which in Chapter 3).

6 Ritschl had in fact received a copy of the book before the end of 1871: he called it ‘an inspired waste of energy’ in his diary entry for 31 December (see Schaberg 1995: 25). Nietzsche wrote to Ritschl on 30 January 1872 (see Nietzsche 1977a: 281–2), prompting a response on 14 February (see Nietzsche 1977b: 541–3). See also Schwindt 2000: 29 n. 46 for similarities between Ritschl and Wilamowitz in their devotion to historicism. Silk and Stern 1981: 90–107 offers an overview of the philological response to *The Birth of Tragedy*.

7 See Babich 2000: 1 n. 1. This title was intended to parody the idea of ‘Music of the Future’ (*Zukunftsmusik*), which had been coined by the German composer Richard Wagner, and to draw attention to Wagner’s extensive influence on Nietzsche’s writings. See further Porter 2011 and Reich 2013: 28–274 for a comprehensive collection of the responses to *The Birth of Tragedy*. 

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philology of the future’ (Zukunftsphilologie), featured the suggestion that
The Birth of Tragedy was a betrayal of Nietzsche’s duties as a classical
philologist. Wilamowitz believed that if Nietzsche wanted to write in the
way he had throughout The Birth of Tragedy, he should behave accordingly
and leave the discipline for good:

But one thing I demand: that Mr. N be faithful to his word. Let him seize
the thyrsos; let him move from India to Greece. But let him step down
from the lectern from which he is supposed to teach knowledge. He may
gather tigers and panthers around his knees, but not Germany’s philolo-

gically interested youth who are supposed to learn – in the asceticism of self-
deny ing work – to look everywhere for nothing but truth, to free their
judgement through deliberate devotion, so that classical antiquity will
provide them with the unique and eternal insight that only the favour of
the muses promises, and that only classical antiquity can guarantee in its
abundance and purity: ‘Let meaning be in their hearts and let form be in
their minds!’

What exactly Nietzsche had included in The Birth of Tragedy to provoke
this vitriolic response from Wilamowitz will become clear over the course
of this book; but for now I want to draw attention to the implications of
his forceful conclusions for what it might mean to understand Dionysus
after Nietzsche. First, Wilamowitz notes the parallels (for him negative)
between Nietzsche’s lyrical writing and the ecstasy associated with the god
Dionysus: he picks up on Nietzsche’s invocation of objects like the
thyrsus, the wand of fennel wrapped with ivy that the worshippers of
Dionysus would brandish in myth as they celebrated his divinity, and the
god’s connection with India and wild animals. He treats them as anti-

thetical to the scholarly endeavour and rejects Nietzsche’s understanding
of antiquity precisely because it does not offer its readers what he terms
‘the unique and eternal insight . . . that only classical antiquity can
guarantee in its abundance and purity’. For Wilamowitz, Nietzsche is at
fault for providing a version of the ancient Greeks in The Birth of Tragedy
that is not sufficiently historical or truthful for the academic position he
holds. As we will see, however, it was precisely the impressionism of
Nietzsche’s account that encouraged later writers and thinkers to use his
ideas and images to plot out their own responses to the modern world by
means of antiquity. This success was rooted in how Nietzsche derived his
understanding of ancient Greece not from any hope of providing ‘unique
and eternal’ precepts about the essential meaning of the ancient world,

8 See Babich 2000: 24. 9 See this chapter, n. 45.
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but from the belief that his vision of Hellenism could offer insights into, and create deeper understandings of, the nature of the past and its place in the present.

We now move forwards seventeen years, to January 1889. After resigning from his post in Basel on account of ill health in 1879, Nietzsche spent the intervening decade using the small pension he was granted by the university to travel around Europe in search of a climate that would help his health, all the while writing the texts that would eventually make him one of the most significant philosophical thinkers of the modern era. We find Nietzsche now amongst the colonnades and Alpine views of Turin, the scene of his irreversible breakdown at the age of forty-four. As he slipped into madness in the first days of 1889, the passionate fascination he had felt for the Greek god Dionysus across his career, and which had so upset Wilamowitz, seized him one final time with an irresistible force. After the failure of his attempt to transform philology in 1872, Nietzsche had for a time made Dionysus a minor character in his philosophical writings. But ever since he had completed his philosophical epic Thus Spoke Zarathustra in 1884, he had begun to revive his vision of a Dionysiac Greece, especially in Beyond Good and Evil (1883) and the new prefaces to The Birth of Tragedy (1886) and The Gay Science (1887). During the frenzy of creativity that Nietzsche experienced in the summer and autumn of 1888, he incorporated major discussions of Dionysus and the Greeks in Twilight of the Idols and Ecce Homo (he also completed The Antichrist, Nietzsche contra Wagner and The Case of Wagner during this period). Alongside these more extended discussions, there were also some remarkably oblique references to the god: Nietzsche writes at one point of Ecce Homo that ‘as I am writing this, the postman is bringing me the head of Dionysus’, perhaps in reference to an image on a postcard, and in the same work he describes feeling ‘the leisure of a god walking along the River Po’ on 30 September at the completion of The Antichrist. This god-like feeling of ‘leisure’ (Mußiggang) had clear importance for Nietzsche at this period, and the original title of Twilight of the Idols was ‘Leisure of a Psychologist’ (Mußiggang der Psychologe); its association with Dionysus is suggested by a short piece that Nietzsche wrote at around the same time (between the end of September 1888 and the beginning of January 1889).

11 See, e.g., Nietzsche 2005: 107–11 and 227–9; see also the epilogue to this introduction.
12 Nietzsche 2005: 78 and 138; see also 156 for Nietzsche’s repetition of this date in the preface to Twilight of the Idols. For conjectures as to the source and identity of this Dionysus-head, see Bernoulli 1908: 117–18 and 436 n. 35, and Kofman 1994: 45.
called ‘Dionysus comes to the River Po’. This story of the god returning to Turin is redolent of Heinrich Heine’s *The Gods in Exile* (first published 1853), where Heine depicts the Greek gods, and Dionysus in particular, continuing their existence secretly in the German countryside (and this resonance is supported by the frequent appearances that Heine makes in Nietzsche’s late works). Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth later wrote the following description of her brother’s story, which she claimed to have destroyed after reading its bitter criticisms of their family (and herself):

At this period . . . he covered some sheets of paper with the wildest fantasies mingling the legend of Dionysus Zagreus with the story of the Passion and with the history of people whom he knew. The god, torn to pieces by his enemies, rises again and walks along the banks of the Po, seeing all that he has ever loved, his ideals, the ideals of the present age, far beneath them. His nearest and dearest have become enemies, who have torn him to pieces. These three sheets, which were addressed to my husband in Paraguay, and to our mother, contain attacks upon Wagner, Schopenhauer, Bismarck, the Emperor, Professor Overbeck, Peter Gast, Frau Cosima Wagner, my husband, my mother and myself.

This list of *dramatis personae* comprises several of the most significant figures in Nietzsche’s life, many of whom we will encounter across this book (and some of whom we will not, such as the Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck and the ‘Emperor’ Umberto I, the King of Italy from 1878 to 1900). It also links this piece to the subject matter of *The Birth of Tragedy*. In 1872, Nietzsche had made Dionysus Zagreus the symbol of his tragic metaphysics; in Greek mythology, Dionysus Zagreus was dismembered by the Titans and subsequently resurrected after being pieced back together. This dialectic of destruction and rebirth offered Nietzsche a model for the relationship between tragic drama, which depicts the demise of its protagonists, and the experience of its audience, where watching and thereby vicariously experiencing this destruction allows them to participate in a greater unity. It was also a book very much on his mind as 1888 drew to a close, as Nietzsche declared in a letter to Heinrich Köselitz on 22 December 1888: ‘I am now absolutely convinced that everything was on target, from the beginning – that everything is one

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thing and wills one thing. I read “The Birth” the day before yesterday: something indescribably, deep, delicate, happy.  

Only a couple of weeks later, the situation had worsened irrevocably. In January 1889, Nietzsche started to sign letters to his friends as ‘Dionysus’ (he signed others as ‘The Crucified’, recalling the famous opposition at the conclusion of *Ecce Homo*, and ‘Nietzsche-Caesar’). When these letters reached their recipients, they swiftly sparked concern. A hurried discussion on Sunday 6 January between the historian Jakob Burckhardt and the theologian Franz Overbeck, two of Nietzsche’s former colleagues at the University of Basel, led to Overbeck departing the next evening from Switzerland to Italy, where he arrived on the afternoon of Tuesday 8 January and set out to find his old friend. Nietzsche had been discovered in a state of distress on the streets of Turin the previous Thursday (3 January) by his Italian landlord Davide Fino, an incident that served as the source of the famous ‘Turin horse’ story, wherein Nietzsche reportedly tried to stop a horse being whipped by its owner and was found sobbing and holding onto the horse’s neck. Fino and his wife Candida had sent an urgent telegram to Overbeck when Nietzsche’s behaviour began to deteriorate, and when Overbeck arrived at his rooms on Piazza Carlo Alberto he was deeply shocked at the scene of distress and dissolution he encountered: as Nietzsche hugged him violently and then broke into tears, Overbeck could barely stay on his feet. Overbeck quickly arranged to transport Nietzsche back to Basel and rarely discussed what he had seen in Turin; but the biographer of his relationship with Nietzsche, Carl Albrecht Bernoulli, recorded that Overbeck would sometimes tell his most trusted confidants that while he was with Nietzsche he had glimpsed ‘embodied in terrifying ways the orgiastic idea of sacred fury that formed the basis of ancient tragedy’. What exactly he was alluding to is unclear (Karl Liebmann believed Overbeck was referring to Nietzsche dancing naked in his room, a behaviour also attested to, albeit indirectly, by Candida Fino). Nevertheless, Overbeck’s euphemistic allusion to

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19 Nietzsche 2005: 151.  
20 See Janz 1979: 35.  
23 See Bernoulli 1908: 251, translation mine. See also Janz 1979: 41–2.  
24 Liebmann 1934: 82; see Verrecchia 1978: 210 for the account of Candida Fino, as later retold by her son Ernesto and printed in an article by the Italian journalist Ugo Pavia, published on 28 July 1950 in *Stampa sera* (see this chapter, n. 26).
ancient tragedy in order to describe the physical symptoms of Nietzsche’s mental collapse represents a means of symbolising the terrible and distressing experience of a beloved friend’s dissolution.\textsuperscript{55} Through the eyes of one of his oldest companions Nietzsche was acting out experiences that he himself had described in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, at the very beginning of his career, as the dark core of the chaotic, expressive and irrepressible Dionysiac phenomenon of tragedy in ancient Greece.\textsuperscript{26}

In Nietzsche’s beginning was his end, and in his end is our beginning; while Nietzsche danced for Dionysus in Turin, he initiated a series of associations, manipulations, reincarnations and receptions that would make the Greek god into a symbol of the vital modernity that forms the subject of this book.

\textit{Nietzsche’s Greeks}

\textit{Dionysus after Nietzsche} explores the way that Nietzsche’s understanding of ancient Greece inspired later writers and thinkers to develop their own innovative ideas about how classical antiquity could inform their approach to the contemporary world. \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} was one of the most influential works of the nineteenth century, and in what follows I explore different responses to its seminal reflections on tragedy, philosophy and modernity in order to trace a Nietzschean tradition of classical reception in the 100 years or so after its initial publication (from 1872 to around 1973). The five figures I have chosen, Jane Harrison, D. H. Lawrence, Martin Heidegger, Richard Schechner and Wole Soyinka, span different genres of literature (including criticism, the novel, philosophy and drama, amongst others) and function as emblems both through their specific uses of the ancient world to reflect on the conditions of their modernity as well as through the broader intellectual networks in which they participated. The particular version of antiquity that each writer engages with is encapsulated in the idea of ‘Nietzsche’s Greeks’, which captures the blending of temporalities that I explore in this book, as Nietzsche’s vivid modernity and the

\textsuperscript{55} See Montinari 2003: 7 for Overbeck’s posthumous evaluation of his friendship with Nietzsche: ‘Nietzsche was the man in whose proximity I breathed most freely, and accordingly I exercised my lungs in their most joyous use granted to me in the realm of human existence by engaging him in conversation. His friendship has been of too much value for me in life to still have any desire to ruin it for myself by some posthumous passion.’

\textsuperscript{26} See also a different account by the journalist Ugo Pavia in an article published on 22 January 1932 in \textit{La stampa}, where he describes the ‘tragic spectacle’ (tragedo spettacolo) of Nietzsche dancing in his room and enacting ‘his role as a Dionysiac initiate’ (la sua parte di iniziato dionisiaco). Reproduced in Verrecchia 1978: 209–10, translation mine.
nostalgic lure of the ancient become inseparably imbricated. One of the central concerns of the study is to chart how this Janus-faced concept has disrupted disciplinary and generic boundaries as well as the dictates of historical chronology: across the chapters, Nietzsche’s Greeks will variously represent a controversial approach to classical scholarship (Harrison), a manifestation of an anti-tragic literary and cultural outlook (Lawrence), a radical rethinking of the philosophical tradition (Heidegger), a shocking approach to theatre (Schechner), and a call for the globalisation of tragedy and intellectual history (Soyinka). What links these heterogeneous approaches is that each continues the project of appreciating Dionysus and the Greeks that ran through Nietzsche’s writing and thought. In this section, I will draw out some of the crucial moments that make up the vision of the god and the Greeks that is to be found in Nietzsche’s catalytic work as a first step to thinking about the particular qualities that it held for its readers.

The opening of section 1 of The Birth of Tragedy illuminates some of the main contours of its later significance, as well as its notoriety, in its presentation of the relationship that Dionysus held with his partner-god Apollo as a structuring metaphor for the work as a whole:

We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics when we have come to realise, not just through logical insight but also with the certainty of something directly apprehended, that the continuous evolution of art is bound up with the duality of the Apolline and the Dionysiac, in much the same way as reproduction depends on there being two sexes which co-exist in a state of perpetual conflict interrupted only occasionally by periods of reconciliation. We have borrowed these names from the Greeks who reveal the profound mysteries of their view of art to those with insight, not in concepts, admittedly, but through the penetratingly vivid figures of their gods.\(^{27}\)

This passage is a jumble of oppositions, analogies and contradictions: there are Apollo and Dionysus, art as concept and art as experience, gods and symbols, aesthetic drives and gender difference. As he continues, Nietzsche invokes the ‘enormous opposition ... between the Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos’.\(^{28}\) This is the first mention of music in the text (after the title) and immediately advertises the powerful influence exerted on The Birth of

\(^{27}\) Nietzsche 1999a: 14 and 1999b: 25. Emphasis in all quotations from Nietzsche are original unless otherwise noted. See Nietzsche 1999b: 9–156 for the original German text, which I will reference throughout.

\(^{28}\) Nietzsche 1999a: 14 and 1999b: 25.
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Tragedy by Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner. In Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy, with which Nietzsche had become obsessed as a student and which was best encapsulated in The World as Will and Representation (first published 1818/1819), it was music that best approximated the nature and experience of the inaccessible metaphysical reality of existence that he termed the ‘will’, which was masked by the perceptible world of objects and ‘representation’. This schema encouraged Nietzsche to believe that Wagner’s music dramas, themselves modelled after ancient Greek tragedy, could recreate in modernity the intimations of the Dionysiac ‘will’ that Nietzsche held ancient spectators to have perceived in the Athenian theatre through their encounter with the Apolline words and forms of the drama. This combination of Schopenhauer and Wagner (along with other contemporary thinkers, like the materialist philosopher Friedrich Albert Lange) formed the conceptual bedrock of the work, and the wilful mixture of antiquity and modernity upset from the very outset the clear association of its account of ancient Greece with any specific historical past.

As The Birth of Tragedy progresses, Apollo comes to represent the civilised qualities of beauty, form, understanding and rationality, while Dionysus stands for the primal qualities of intoxication, instinct, myth and the irrational. Apollo and Dionysus are both described as ‘drives’ (Triebe), eternal features of human existence and experience, though it is to Dionysus that Nietzsche’s account is devoted. As he comments in relation to the Greek religious mindset at the cusp of sections 2 and 3, ‘Apolline consciousness only hid this Dionysiac world from them like a veil’; consequently he exhorts his readers ‘to dismantle the artful edifice of Apolline culture stone by stone, as it were, until we catch sight of the foundations on which it rests’. But what exactly is this Dionysiac element of ancient Greek culture? In section 1, Nietzsche suggests that it is best conveyed by the analogy of intoxication:

These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who

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60 See Porter 2000b. For the history of this opposition before Nietzsche, see Vogel 1966.


62 Nietzsche 1999b: 21 and 22, and 1999b: 34.
are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life.\footnote{Nietzsche 1999a: 17 and 1999b: 28–9.}

What had started the work as a quasi-conceptual way of discussing art has become here a passionate subjective experience, an ecstatic moment of drunkenness and sensuality. In Greek culture as depicted by Nietzsche, this Dionysiac feeling has three main manifestations: tragedy, festival and myth. Tragedy is a type of art that was created ‘by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic “Will”, as Dionysus and Apollo come together to forge an aesthetic form that can capture the broiling revolt of the former in the words, images and stories of the latter, where the creator becomes ‘an artist of both dream and intoxication at once’.\footnote{Nietzsche 1999a: 14 and 1999b: 25 and 30.} But what is also at stake is ‘the labyrinth of the origin of Greek tragedy’, which Nietzsche locates in the satyr-chorus from which tragic drama evolved.\footnote{Nietzsche 1999a: 36 and 1999b: 52.} As he later suggests, ‘this insight leads us to understand Greek tragedy as a Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again in an Apolline world of images’.\footnote{Nietzsche 1999a: 44 and 1999b: 62.} After this, Dionysus actually comes on stage in Nietzsche’s account in section 10 in the claim that ‘the only subject matter of Greek tragedy, in its earliest form, was the sufferings of Dionysos’.\footnote{Nietzsche 1999a: 51 and 1999b: 71.} Tragedy is the only art form that can take Dionysus as its subject matter (hence the importance of its imminent rebirth in the musical work of Richard Wagner), and it is only then as a very specific manifestation of the ‘suffering Dionysos of the Mysteries’, the Dionysus Zagreus that Nietzsche mentioned in his late writings from Turin.\footnote{Nietzsche 1999a: 52 and 1999b: 72.}

Nietzsche’s description of Dionysiac festival is connected to his account of tragedy in that it provides the setting for dramatic performance (and Nietzsche reflects at some length on the dynamics and origins of Greek festival culture).\footnote{Nietzsche 1999a: 17–18 and 20–1, and 1999b: 28–30 and 31–4.} But what is more significant for thinking about the later popularity of Nietzsche’s Greeks is the extensive description that Nietzsche included about the experience of the festival and its Dionysiac foundations. This festival unity features in section 1:

Not only is the bond between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysiac, but nature, alienated, inimical or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind . . . [H]earing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite