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## The Birth of Tragedy

Whoever does not merely comprehend the Dionysian but comprehends himself in the word “Dionysian” needs no refutation of Plato or Christianity or Schopenhauer—he *smells the decay*.

—*EH-BT*, 2

Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy* in January 1872. The book belongs with *Unmodern Observations* (1873–1876) and the contemporaneous posthumous writings and fragments in what is now usually considered Nietzsche’s early period. In fact, one already finds in these writings the important insights that will be revealed in the progressive development of his work. To be sure, these early writings do not have the critical inspiration of *Human, All Too Human* (1878–1880), a work situated at the very axis of this development. Nor do they have the breath, the violence or tension of the later texts, those of 1888, where polemics and aggressivity reach a paroxysm and a style unequalled in beauty. These early themes, however, are no less fundamental to Nietzschean thought because they are already expressed, either explicitly or implicitly, in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This is precisely why, in the first chapter, we will center our questions on this work, without overlooking the other writings of the same period or other later periods that relate, directly or indirectly, to these important themes.

In this difficult to understand work—despite the clarity of its composition—Nietzsche not only brings another perspective to the origin of

tragedy, but he also asserts, with remarkably original insights, the relations between art and science, Greek civilization and the modern era, and tragic wisdom and theoretical knowledge. Indeed, the question of tragic wisdom insofar as it is an affirmation of life, the *Yes*, is even of greater importance to Nietzsche than the origin of tragedy and the opposition between Apollo and Dionysus. “What is essential to that theory—asserts Nietzsche sixteen years later—is the conception of art in its relation to life. One sees there, as much psychologically as physiologically, the great *stimulant*, what *drives* one eternally to life, to eternal life . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Formally, *The Birth of Tragedy* consists of twenty-five chapters or sections. The first six sections are introductory and not of particular interest stylistically. The heart of the work can be found in sections 7 through 15. They treat the birth and the death of tragedy. With Socrates as the principal adversary, these sections focus on the relations between art and science, understood as dialectic, as logic and theory.<sup>2</sup> As Nietzsche himself even acknowledges:

The critique of Socrates constitutes the central part of the book. Socrates, the adversary of tragedy who destroys the demonic instincts—art’s preventive. Socratism, the great misunderstanding of the life of art, representing morality, dialectics, the frugality of the theoretician, a form of lassitude: the famous Greek serenity is only a *twilight* . . .<sup>3</sup>

The nine following sections, with the exception of 24, appear quite meager in comparison with Nietzsche’s philosophical genius. They obviously run counter to the new problematic that he will eventually introduce. Following a posthumous fragment, it seems that Nietzsche intended to finish the first work at section 14: “‘Socrates, practice music?’ as the final chapter.”<sup>4</sup> And, in fact, he regrets this most bitterly in an *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, written sixteen years later:

But there is something far more worse in this book, something I now regret more than that I obscured and spoiled Dionysian premonitions with Schopenhauerian formulations: namely, that I *spoiled* the grandiose *Greek problem*, as it had risen before my eyes, by introducing the most modern of problems! That I appended hopes where there was no ground for hope, where everything pointed all too plainly to an end! That on the basis of the latest German music I began to rave about “the German spirit” as if that were in the process even then of discovering and finding itself again.<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche was thus counting on the renewal of tragic wisdom, on the rebirth of Dionysian music through German music, “in its vast solar orbit from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner.”<sup>6</sup> These latter considerations were too *modern*. They too readily accepted the imminent revival of Hellenic antiquity. They contributed to Wagnermania. They fueled and fomented as if they were a phenomenon of *ascendant* life and not a symptom of *decadence*. Nietzsche would say of the book in general:

To say it once more: today I find it an impossible book: I consider it badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, and in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof, suspicious even of the *propriety* of proof, a book for initiates . . .<sup>7</sup>

What, then, are the challenges, what are the questions underlying the “metaphysics of the artist” and of that work that sets it forth through an aesthetic problematic? What reasons lead us to maintain, at this point, that it is a question of a relation of forces, of multiple forces that are made patently visible with the later, skillfully polemical writings? We now anticipate immediately that the aesthetic, cultural, metaphysical, and religious problems concealed by morality, express themselves only through a relation of forces and can only be thought through a thought that is itself *paradoxical*. This is what we will now try to elucidate.

## APOLLO AND DIONYSUS

Nietzsche opens the first chapter of *The Birth of Tragedy* with a statement that appears in some ways to be the primary intuition guiding the reader through his reflections on the origin and the death of tragic art: “We have gained much for the science of aesthetics, once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality—just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations.”<sup>8</sup> It is in fact these two deities that tie together the two worlds of Greek art: the Apollonian plastic art, and the Dionysian nonplastic art. Apollo is the god of beautiful illusion, of measured restraint, the sculptor god, the “glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*, through

whose gestures and eyes all the joy and wisdom of 'illusion,' together with its beauty, speak to us."<sup>9</sup> To render these two impulses more accessible, Nietzsche represents them as two distinct aesthetic worlds: Apollo, that of the dream and Dionysus, that of intoxication and ecstasy which, through its own artistic power, breaks the bonds of the *principium individuationis* and makes manifest the most intimate ground of man, things, nature, and the primordially One.

A number of Nietzsche interpreters see in the opposition between Apollo and Dionysus a kind of dialectical progression in the course of which Dionysus takes on the bearing, assumes the attributes of Apollo, is set in opposition to Socrates so as to lead to a later and more fundamental opposition: "*Dionysus versus the Crucified*," a passage that closes *Ecce Homo*. Among these interpreters we find Gilles Deleuze and Walter Kaufmann. Deleuze sees in Nietzsche's work an anti-Hegelian project, while Kaufmann tries to turn Nietzsche into a "monistic dialectician." In a certain way, it is Nietzsche himself who favors these interpretations, for he admits in reference to *The Birth of Tragedy*: "it (this work) smells offensively Hegelian, and the cadaverous perfume of Schopenhauer sticks only to a few."<sup>10</sup>

In reality, *The Birth of Tragedy* does not present a uniform, regular, and continuous progression of these two opposed gods converging in a synthesis of Dionysus.<sup>11</sup> In fact, despite the terms and ideas of "duality" and "opposition" used in the text, a closer reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* would, rather, reveal a certain hesitation or refusal on Nietzsche's part to characterize either one of these two drives in an exclusive way, or to oppose them too simply. Thus, Dionysus "In his existence as a dismembered god, . . . possesses the dual nature of a cruel, barbarized demon and a mild, gentle ruler."<sup>12</sup> But this does not apply only to Dionysus; Apollo, too, connected to the spell of the beautiful illusion, is clothed in fearful and appalling attributes.<sup>13</sup> Now separate, now together, here in open struggle, there reconciled, these two gods nevertheless bear common traits of one through the other, of one in the other. Although the Dionysian appears in the Greek Apollonian as "titanic" and "barbaric," he is incapable of dissimulating the affinity that is attached to that very ground he rejects: "And behold: Apollo could not live without Dionysus! The 'titanic' and 'barbaric' were in the last analysis as necessary as the Apollonian!"<sup>14</sup> Apollo, of course, appears as the principle of individuation, by which he carries out the ends of the primordially One and achieves, through the illusion he creates in tragedy, the victory over the Dionysian,

that is, over the primordial element in music. Yet it is of no small importance that this illusion is broken and annihilated; it is as if the destruction of the visible was the very condition necessary to open access to the heart of true being: "And thus the Apollonian illusion reveals itself as what it really is—the veiling during the performance of the tragedy of the real Dionysian effect; but the latter is so powerful that it ends by forcing the Apollonian drama itself into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysian wisdom and even denies itself and its Apollonian visibility."<sup>15</sup> And yet, the accord by which tragedy is achieved could never be known without the interaction of these two realms of art: that of Apollo and that of Dionysus.

Schopenhauer's influence and that of Kant—by way of his influence on Schopenhauer—run throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*. Through Apollonian illusion and Dionysian music, tragic wisdom reveals the most intimate ground of things, nature, the willed one, and the primordially One. Moreover, Dionysian music appears to us as the mirror of the universal will, for the eternal truth that springs from the will itself is reflected and reproduced in it. But in chapter 5, Nietzsche already distances himself from Schopenhauer, and in chapter 7, his own position is even more clearly articulated. Here he proposes that the metaphysical comfort embodied in tragedy and which is incarnated in the satyric chorus is pure pleasure—pleasure in its indestructible power that, despite the changing character of phenomena, affirms life. To be sure, the profound Hellene who the chorus comforts and who looks boldly into the terrible destructive forces of history and nature, courts the danger "of longing for a *Buddhistic negation* of the will."<sup>16</sup> But art comes to his rescue, it saves him: "Art saves him, and through art—life."<sup>17</sup> For Nietzsche, then, art admits of the universal suffering, accepts and assumes it, but transfigures it in the affirmation, in the *Yes* to life. This is why fifteen years later he would say: "Tragic art, rich in these two experiences, is defined as the reconciliation of Apollo and Dionysus. Dionysus imparts the most profound meaning to appearance, and that appearance can nevertheless be denied with *sensual pleasure*. This is directed, like the tragic vision of the world, against the Schopenhauerean doctrine of *resignation*."<sup>18</sup>

In the later chapters, Nietzsche will no longer be content to question the relations between the Apollonian and Dionysian, nor will he settle on merely establishing that tragedy reproduces the universal will, where the artist and Dionysian spectator look boldly into the primordially One and transfigure suffering through art. It would be a further step for him to try

to grasp that original phenomenon that is Dionysian art and to understand what constitutes the pleasure we experience through this type of art.

Indeed, in the musical tragedy, where Apollonian art is perfected by justifying the world of individuation, the spectator contemplates the world transfigured on the stage, and yet he denies it: "He sees the tragic hero before him in epic clearness and beauty, and nevertheless rejoices in his annihilation. . . . He sees more extensively and profoundly than ever, and yet wishes he were blind."<sup>19</sup> But the tragic artist also creates the figures that his Dionysian drive devours, so as to foreshadow, behind the annihilation of the phenomenal world, "the highest artistic primal joy, in the bosom of the primordially One."<sup>20</sup>

But Nietzsche wants to avoid any moral account regarding the pleasure one feels before the world of the stage, even given the fact that for most, as in the case of aesthetics, it is often under the effect of moral delight, of a catharsis or a consolation that the tragic myth appears. For him, tragedy is not a "pathological discharge," but, rather, a form of superior art. And it is only in the sphere of aesthetics itself that he can find an explanation of the pleasure peculiar to tragedy. "How can the ugly and the disharmonic, the content of the tragic myth, stimulate aesthetic pleasure?"<sup>21</sup>

To resolve this difficult problem, Nietzsche resorts to musical dissonance, since music is the language most apt to reproduce the universal will, to manifest the ground of things and to confirm that *the world and existence can only be justified as aesthetic phenomena*. With this as support, Nietzsche will go on to state that the pleasure aroused by the tragic myth and that provoked by dissonance has a common origin (*Heimat*), that is, the Dionysian. This knowledge, combined with the primordial delight (*Urlust*) experienced in suffering, gives rise to music and tragic myth. An experience comparable to what occurs in the use of musical dissonance also appears in tragedy. There, we wish to see all while desiring to get beyond the visible, and in music one experiences the desire to hear and at the same time go beyond the audible. This experience of the destruction of visibility and audibility as a condition of and passageway to primordial delight (*Urlust*), or more precisely, that destruction being itself a pleasure, is reaffirmed in a posthumous fragment of 1888, which reads: "In the same way, pleasure is given far more primitively than pain. Pain, in such a case, is only contingent, an after-affect of pleasure (of the will to become, to grow, to shape, that is, to *create*. But this act of creation also includes destruction.)."<sup>22</sup>

This is why, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche links the Dionysian state with that “striving for the infinite,” that “wing beat of longing” that accompanies the highest state of pleasure. It is Dionysus who, through the play of the construction and destruction of the phenomenal world, opens a passageway to primordial delight. But this construction-destruction is itself delight, for, like in Heraclitus, the world-building force can be compared to a playing child who places stones here and there, and builds sand hills only to overturn them again.<sup>23</sup> Thus, for Dionysus, the world is a huge backgammon game, the kingdom of a child, who overturns and builds and overturns anew. This is the incessant desire to become, to create and to destroy in voluptuous delight. “In the same way, pleasure is given far more primitively than pain. Pain, in such a case, is only contingent, an after-affect of the will to pleasure (of the will to become, to grow, to shape, that is, to *create*). But this act of creation also includes destruction.”<sup>24</sup> In this sense appearance becomes a provisional solution, grasping each moment, denied each moment, sought after when it is denied, in affirmation and will. This is a succession of visions and transfigurations that are promulgated eternally and can never be overcome.

This conception of art as play, introduced by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, will be unique to him and developed up to the point of his later writings: art as the play of deception, as illusion, fiction and lie; art as the great stimulant of life, as the great *Yes* to life. In fact, the will to appearance is, for Nietzsche, more profound, more originary, and more primitive than the will to be: “and being itself is only a form of the will to illusion.”<sup>25</sup> Apollo and Dionysus are thus presented in the *Birth of Tragedy* in opposition and reconciled, one assuming the traits of the other, taking part in the attributes of the other, in an exchange that is continuously regenerated, continuously renewed. This is why Aeschylus’s Prometheus wears both the mask of Apollo and Dionysus: the titanic effort to carry humanity higher and higher, farther and farther constitutes, for Nietzsche, the common trait between the Promethian and the Dionysian, whereas in his profound demand for justice, Aeschylus also reveals Prometheus’s paternal descent from Apollo, the god of just limits and established measures. This Promethian nature is the bearer of both Dionysian and Apollonian attributes, expressed by Nietzsche in the conception: “All that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both.”<sup>26</sup>

Even if the name Apollo is blurred as the early work progresses, and fades away much to Dionysus’s profit, this does not imply absolutely a determination on Nietzsche’s part to show the shift of these two forces as

a movement toward Absolute Knowing—a movement where Dionysus would represent the synthesis that would redeem Apollo as the *one* of these moments. Even so, there are a number of interpreters who try to affix a design to these two drives that sustains a certain reading of Hegel. It is as if Nietzsche's work could only be understood as a reaction in favor of or against Hegel, for or against the dialectic.

Thus, for Gilles Deleuze, the antithesis Dionysus-Apollo will be replaced by the complementary Dionysus-Ariadne, and the opposition Dionysus-Socrates will be substituted for a more fundamental one, that which closes *Ecce Homo*: "Dionysus versus the Crucified. . . ." <sup>27</sup> At another level of interpretation, but fully utilizing Hegelian concepts that contrast largely with the aims, method and development central to Nietzsche, Bernard Pautrat asserts: "The more one moves away from the strict problematic of *The Birth*—and of its ontological 'ground'—the greater the stress on the one of the couple's terms, to the point of the *complete effacement* of the other. In the later texts, where the idea of the Dionysus-philosopher is developed, the name of Apollo is virtually absent, simply because it has become useless." <sup>28</sup> Thus: "There is no Apollo-philosopher to the extent there is never something else, where Platonism has not ceased to be the way of thinking. Now, what allows us to say that Platonism has always been the Apollonianism of thought, is that 'philosophical Dionysianism' which constitutes the Dionysian or tragic text, which recognizes in itself the power and the law of difference-in-itself, and thus welcomes Apollo as the name of one of these moments." <sup>29</sup>

Even more remarkably, however, in later text (Spring 1888), which forms part of a series of reflections on *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche continues to examine the ambiguous character of these two forces:

This antinomic character of the Dionysian and Apollonian in the interior of the Greek soul is one of the great enigmas—in view of Greek genius—to which Nietzsche is drawn. At bottom, Nietzsche has tried to divine precisely why the Greek Apollonian became necessarily born out of a Dionysian subsoil; why the Greek Dionysian had to become Apollonian, that is, to destroy its will to monstrosity, multiplicity, chance and to turn against a will to measure, simplicity, harmonious integration in a rule and a conception. The unmeasurable, the savage, the Asiatic is the ground of his character: the courage of the Greek lies in his struggle against what he has of the Asiatic: beauty has not been given to him, no more than logic, or the natural evidence of morality—beauty has been conquered, willed, taken by force; it is his victory . . . <sup>30</sup>



This text demonstrates how Nietzsche himself refused to privilege one of these two forces to the exclusion of the other, or to purely and simply oppose them, though they more often express themselves in opposition or in open struggle. But the hostility is a way in which one recognizes oneself in difference. Here again Nietzsche accentuates their ambiguous character, as well as the flux and reflux that they maintain by relation to one another, the one unable to overcome the other, to live, to conceive without the other. This is why the Apollonian can only be born of Dionysian basis, a savage ground, the will to multiplicity, to chance, to disrupting, and to the unmeasured. The Dionysus-philosopher of the later texts—where Apollo appears to Pautrat as one of the moments overcome in the progress of the Spirit, and Dionysus as the Concept realized—is the Dionysus who guards over the ambiguous traits, both those of Apollo and Dionysus. Thus, one will find in *Twilight of the Idols*, also written in 1888, a portrait of Goethe painted in a wide variety of colors, which recalls the mixture and shimmering of colors constantly at play between these two drives. This portrait, which is cast in a rhetorical effusion rarely seen in the later works, ends in Nietzsche designating Goethe as a “spirit who has become free” and “stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism. . . .” And he concludes: “Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name of *Dionysus*.”<sup>31</sup>

This elaboration of the Dionysian phenomenon, as it appears in the later writings, rejoins, through changes and developments at work in Nietzschean thought, what was already expressed, either implicitly or explicitly, in *The Birth of Tragedy* and other related texts: an affirmative life force, Dionysus presented as the god of the overabundance of forces, through whom the good Hellene will be assured—thanks to the mysteries of sexuality—the eternal return of life, the triumphant *Yes* to life, and eternal life itself.

If there is a problem that haunted Nietzsche, it is that of the relation of forces and that of creation and destruction. But one cannot conceive creation and destruction in the Nietzschean oeuvre apart from this relation of forces. Nonetheless, how could a force or forces be able to assert themselves in difference while at the same time affirm that difference, or, in the case of nihilism, turn around against themselves?

As his prophet Zarathustra, the later Dionysus effectively possesses this power to embrace all spaces, to stride, swiftly, across all expanses, to descend to the lowest depths and ascend to the greatest heights, with playfulness and mischievousness, with grace and seriousness, the soul overflowing, open to willing-life and willing to become.

*But that is the concept of Dionysus himself—*. Another consideration leads to the very same result. The psychological problem in the type that is Zarathustra is how he that says No and *does* No to an unheard-of degree, to everything to which one has so far said Yes, can nevertheless be the opposite of a No-saying spirit; how the spirit who bears the heaviest fate, a fatality of a task, can nevertheless be the lightest and most transcendent—Zarathustra is a dancer—how he that has the hardest, most terrible insight into reality, that has thought the “most abysmal idea,” nevertheless does not consider it an objection to existence, not even to its eternal recurrence—but rather one reason more for being himself the eternal Yes to all things, “the tremendous, unbounded saying Yes and Amen.”—“Into the abysses I still carry the blessings of my saying Yes.”—*But this is the concept of Dionysus once again.*<sup>32</sup>

### JUSTIFICATION BY AESTHETICS AND THE QUESTION OF NATURE

Why did Nietzsche begin his philosophical work with an aesthetic problematic? Why does *The Birth of Tragedy* stress the fact that life, transfigured and affirmed by art, is the only satisfactory theodicy?

In fact, Nietzsche was often associated in his early period with the German Romantics. This was because the problematic of art was of primary importance in all his initial writings. But a sharper look turned toward the eighteenth century, and toward the influence of the Enlightenment on the nineteenth century, will help us to better understand why Nietzsche gave primacy to aesthetic values, without being part of the line of romantic philosophers beginning with Schelling. This question leads us to examine the conception of finality and, particularly, the way finality in nature was construed by the representatives of the *Aufklärung*. A text that reveals this spirit was published by Kant in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (1784) under the title: *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*. In this text, composed of nine theses, one finds a theory of “purpose in nature,” one that Nietzsche does not in any way sanction. In the first thesis Kant already speaks of “a leading thread of reason,” an idea that will be restated and developed six years later in paragraph 83 of *The Critique of Judgment*. In the Fourth Thesis, the philosopher asserts: “*The means which nature employs to accomplish the development of all faculties is the antagonism of men in society, since this antagonism becomes, in the end, the cause of a lawful order of society.*” Further on in the same thesis, we read:

In this way, the first true steps from barbarism to culture, in which the unique social worth of man consists, now occur, all man's talents are gradually developed, his taste is cultured, and through progressive enlightenment he begins to establish a way of thinking that in time can transform the crude natural capacity for moral discrimination into definite practical principles and thus transform a pathologically enforced agreement into a society, and, finally, into a moral whole.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of the Seventh Thesis, Kant maintains: "All good that is not grafted onto a morally-good character is nothing but illusion and glistening misery." And he ends the text, in the Ninth Thesis, by explicitly naming *providence*:

Such a *justification* of nature—or better, of *providence*—is no unimportant motive for adopting a particular perspective in observing the world. For what use is it to laud and recommend observing the majesty and wisdom of creation in the non rational realm of nature, if that part of the great theatre of supreme wisdom that contains the purpose of all the rest—the history of the human race—should remain an endless reproach to it . . .<sup>34</sup>

We are well aware of the influence exercised by Shaftesbury's philosophy on the eighteenth century, not only in England but also in France, Germany, and particularly on Leibniz and the so-called precritical period of Kant. Kant's conception of beauty, even though it has undergone certain transformations and has been distanced from the model of the Cambridge philosophers, nevertheless sustains a perspective of immanence and finality that Shaftesbury himself maintained in his philosophy of nature. In this regard, Shaftesbury's *Hymn to Nature* played a considerable role in Herder's philosophy of nature and in that of the young Goethe.<sup>35</sup>

Now, nothing is more foreign to the basic method and thought of Nietzsche than to assign an ordered finality to nature, to endow it with some providence or a pedagogical and rational *telos*. These conceptions, which he attributes, either explicitly or implicitly, to the forces of morality, are revealed progressively as symptoms of decadence, as an expression of the negative forces of life that are disguised as noble, sublime, and "divine" appearances.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche deliberately uses the terminology developed by Christian morality up to his time. In doing so, he accentuates the change of values he introduced in such a terminology, even

though the revaluation of all values is only clearly manifested in the later writings. Thus, already in chapter 3 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he refers to art as what the Greeks, exceptionally gifted at suffering, have used to create the Olympian world as a mirror in which life appears transfigured in the joy, the incitement to survive, the affirmation and justification of life: “the only satisfactory theodicy.” He stresses several times that the world and existence can only be justified insofar as they are treated as aesthetic phenomena.<sup>36</sup>

That same terminology and evaluation will be reiterated, sixteen years later, in a series of reflections on *The Birth of Tragedy*:

*Art as the redemption of the man of knowledge*—of those who see the terrifying and questionable character of existence, who want to see it, the men of tragic knowledge.

*Art as the redemption of the man of action*—of those who see the terrifying and questionable character of existence but live it, want to live it, the tragic-warlike man, the hero.

*Art as the redemption of the sufferer*—as the way to states in which suffering is willed, transfigured, deified, where suffering is form of great delight.<sup>37</sup>

But does nature have any ends? Yes, but these ends remain hidden. In referring to the “naive” in art, Nietzsche explains it as the capacity of Apollonian culture to overcome the terrifying aspects of existence and the susceptibility to suffering by recourse to the most forceful and pleasurable illusions. But it is only rarely that the naive is attained—that one takes total possession of the transfiguration and beauty of mere appearance. “The Homeric ‘naïveté’ can be understood only as the complete victory of Apollonian illusion: this is one of those illusions which nature so frequently employs to achieve her own ends. The true goal is veiled by a phantasm: and while we stretch out our hands for the latter, nature attains the former by means of an illusion.”<sup>38</sup>

For Nietzsche, Homer is the “naive” artist par excellence. He knows how to combat, through the mirroring play of beauty, the artistically correlative attitude for suffering and for the wisdom of suffering, in affirmation.

Curiously, in the same chapter and context in which he treats “naive” art in Apollonian civilization and the ends of nature, Nietzsche stresses, directly following the above quote, that “in order to glorify themselves, these creatures had to feel themselves worthy of glory; they had to behold themselves again in a higher sphere, without this perfect world of con-

temptation acting as a command or a reproach.”<sup>39</sup> Notice the word “command” is not used here by chance.

In a writing of December 1872, that treats the origin of the ancient Greek state, Nietzsche refers unequivocally to the ends of nature, placing an accent on force, violence and the cruelty that form the basis of this origin: “Here again we see with what pitiless inflexibility Nature, in order to arrive at Society, forges for herself the cruel tool of the State—namely, that *conqueror* with the iron hand, which is nothing else than the objectification of the instinct indicated.”<sup>40</sup> Here again one does not feel the presence of an ordered finality of nature that employs the antagonism and discord among men to lead them, through an “enlightened progression,” to a moral whole or to a legal order of society. In fact, the idea of progress, of a legal order, and a “leading thread of reason,” are totally excluded from Nietzsche’s basic intent. This will appear even more evident in *Unmodern Observations*, where he is critical of the supposed superiority of modern civilization: “I do not necessarily mean religious dogmas only, but such claptrap notions as “progress,” “general education,” “nationalism,” “modern state,” “struggle of church and state (*Kulturkampf*).”<sup>41</sup>

It is clear that Nietzsche views nature as the setting for the State, but as a means of reaching its liberation in the world of art. Thus, for him, the suffering, which is already proper to human existence, must be increased to allow a small number of Olympians to bring forth art: “. . . then out of all that speaks the enormous necessity of the State, without which Nature might not succeed in coming, through Society, to her deliverance in semblance, in the mirror of genius.”<sup>42</sup>

But what exactly is nature for Nietzsche? Generally speaking, it appears to him in the sense of *physis*, that is, as a dynamic principle of growth and production. In fact, in this first period, and despite distancing himself from Schopenhauer in the work on tragedy, his influence is still quite apparent. This is why in a fragment dated 1870–1871, he speaks of a “nucleus of nature” as “true being, being in itself, anonymous truth, the sphere of eternal being, the inaccessible One and Eternal, the abyss of true being.”<sup>43</sup>

But whereas in *The Birth of Tragedy* nature is present as a great artist—who expresses herself symbolically through Dionysian dithyramb, who creates the tragic chorus, through the symbolic resources of dance, music, and language, who manifests her knowledge, the ground of herself, the ground of things and the *universal will*—nature will appear much later, in a greatly enlarged sphere of culture,

aspiring to her own humanization and liberation, engendering, with the help of culture, the “philosopher,” “artist,” and the “saint.”

Nietzsche’s idea of nature will thus be restated and developed in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, a work that forms part of *Unmodern Observations*, but that, along with the other three works composing the text, clearly contrasts with the bold insights and the malleability of style characteristic of the earlier writings.

Effectively, in section 5 of *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche fleshes out what he means by an end of nature, as well as the relation that exists between Nature and culture. In an affirmative statement, where the critique of Darwin is patently obvious, he writes:

They are those true *men*, those no-longer animals, the philosophers, artists and saints. In their appearance and through their appearance, Nature, who makes no leaps, makes her only leap, a leap of joy! For the first time she feels that she has reached her goal (*am Ziele*), the point at which she intuits that she will have to unlearn her goals (*Ziele*), and that she has staked too much on the game of life and Becoming.<sup>44</sup>

It is thus culture that implements liberation, growth, and transfiguration—in brief, the fulfillment of *physis*. For: “This is the fundamental idea of *culture*, insofar as culture imposes only one duty on each of us: *to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist, and the saint, within us and in the world, and thereby to labor for the perfection of Nature.*”<sup>45</sup>

But nature, left to herself, is incapable of utilizing these means to arrive at an end. It wastes its energies, and dispenses its forces by “follies and blunders.” Almost everywhere it fails and unceasingly spoils its work, to start over and over again. It finds itself in distress, “striving toward Man, in her pain at seeing her work once again miscarry, yet everywhere successfully producing beginnings, features, forms.”<sup>46</sup>

But this work, like nearly all of Nietzsche’s writings, raises more questions than it resolves. For, although the conception of nature and culture is revisited and extended, the relations between the two remain in the end cast in shadow. Nature is presented as an active principle of production that, nevertheless, needs culture to achieve its ends. But culture is that very *physis*, which appears worked, improved, and transfigured. This is apparent in section 5 of the abovementioned text: “And if all nature aspires to man, it is to show us that man is necessary in order to redeem nature from the curse of animal existence; and that in man existence at last owns a mirror in whose depths life no longer appears as senseless, but

in its metaphysical meaning.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, are there two principles or one? This is a question that is also posed by Nietzsche: “where does the animal end and man begin?”

Certain interpreters, Kaufmann among them, see in these two domains of *physis-culture*, as in the couple *Dionysus-Apollo*, a correspondence with *matter-form*. *Physis* is the chaos to be organized, or the matter to be informed, elevated and transfigured. Thus, the conclusion is that the young Nietzsche is a dialectician, whose thought in the later writings becomes monistic, exemplified by the will to power. For Kaufmann, the *will to power* represents the final reconciliation bridging the abyss between conflicting drives, that is, those of Dionysus and Apollo, nature and values, *physis* and culture, disorder and finality, the empirical self and the true self.<sup>48</sup> But these authors run up against numerous difficulties in trying to settle the question of knowing if Nietzsche is a “monist” rather than a “dualist,” since either one of these responses can only be reached by an act of force. That is to say, Nietzschean thought is set constantly in a coming and going, in an “interval,” in a ceaseless movement that repeats itself as difference, or as the affirmation of difference—in short, as the reality by which it expresses and shows itself and, continually, tries to evaluate itself. This explains the metaphor of the bridge, used frequently in Nietzsche’s work. This metaphor reappears in the form of the “tightrope walker” in the speech Zarathustra gives when he arrives at a small village situated at the edge of the forest. After having announced the coming of the overman to the people gathered in the marketplace, he speaks about the man who wills to “go under.” Indeed, it is after having come down from the mountain and crossed the forest that, at its very *edge*, Zarathustra announces the overman. Then, in an amazed tone, he exclaims:

“Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping.”

“What is great *in* man is that he is a bridge and not an end (*Zweck*): what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* (*Übergang*) and a *going under* (*Untergang*).”<sup>49</sup>

Martin Buber says that:

The problem of man is for Kant a problem of limits (*ein Grenzproblem*), that is, the problem of a being who effectively belongs to nature but not to nature alone, of a being who settles at the frontier of nature and some

other realm. For Nietzsche, the problem of man is a problem of borders (*ein Randproblem*), the problem of one being who, leaving the heart of nature, finds himself at its extreme border, at the perilous extremes of natural Being, where he does not find that, as in Kant, the ether of the spirit begins, but, rather, the vertiginous abyss of nothingness.<sup>50</sup>

This statement will become clearer if we consider it in the perspective of what is represented, for the Hellene, in the person of Socrates, tragic wisdom, and science.

### SOCRATES, TRAGEDY, SCIENCE

A sentence in chapter 14 of *The Birth of Tragedy* both consolidates and demonstrates the principal arguments of the book, namely, the essence of tragedy and its death by Socratism:

“Optimistic dialectic drives *music* out of tragedy with the scourge of its syllogisms; that is, it destroys the essence of tragedy, which can be interpreted only as a manifestation and projection into images of Dionysian states, as the visible symbolizing of music, as the dream-world of Dionysian intoxication.”<sup>51</sup> In his *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, Nietzsche will add that tragedy, born of the Dionysian and of tragic myth, has died as a result of “Socratic morality,” the dialectic, or the frugality and cheerfulness of the theoretical man. For, given that “the problem of science cannot be recognized in the context of science,” that same science, considered for the first time “as problematic, as questionable,” will be the task of this book, that is, “to look at science in the perspective of the artist, but at art in that of life.”<sup>52</sup>

In fact, as we have said in the beginning, the central and most interesting part of the work, in which Nietzsche establishes his “metaphysics of the artist,” is found in chapters 7 through 15. These chapters center on the birth and death of tragedy, employing dense and difficult nuances, which are hard to grasp in their richness and, subsequently, their ambiguity. Socrates, who enters the stage in chapter 12, kills tragedy by speaking through Euripides: “Even Euripides was, in a sense, only a mask.”<sup>53</sup>

Nietzsche associates Socratism, dialectics, and logic with science, to the extent that science advances by reasoning and maintains a finality and universal validity to the detriment of the power of illusion, intuition, appearance, and the play of fantasy that produces art and affirms life. The concept is ice cold, ossified, a symptom of an indigence rather than



an ascendant and overflowing life, which justifies itself, affirms itself in its excess of force. Thus, regarding Heraclitus and Parmenides, Nietzsche will write:

While each word of Heraclitus expresses the pride and majesty of truth, but of truth grasped in intuitions rather than attained by the rope ladder of logic, while in Sibylline rapture Heraclitus gazes but does not peer, knows but does not calculate, his contemporary Parmenides stands beside him as counter-image, likewise expressing a type of truth-teller but one formed of ice rather than fire, pouring cold piercing light all around.<sup>54</sup>

Calculated reasoning moves arduously; it requires solid foundations on which to step in the course of its laborious advance. But what gives philosophy the capacity to leap over great distances, to reach its objective by light and quick steps? It is an alien and illogical force called imagination. “Lifted by it, it leaps from possibility to possibility, using each one as a temporary resting place.”<sup>55</sup> This is why Heraclitus appears to Nietzsche as a philosopher whose “regal possession is his extraordinary power to think intuitively,” whereas “toward the other kind of thinking, the type that is accomplished in concepts and logical combinations, in other words toward reason, he shows himself cool, insensitive, in fact hostile, and seems to feel pleasure when he can contradict it with an intuitively arrived-at truth.”<sup>56</sup> But when and how did tragedy die?

At the very beginning of chapter 11 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche states: “Greek tragedy met an end different from her older sister-arts: she died by suicide, in consequence of an irreconcilable conflict; she died tragically. . . .”<sup>57</sup> What this means, then, is that tragedy can only die tragically. And it died by the intervention of one of its greatest representatives, Euripides, the tragic poet who brought the common people onto the stage, who privileged the dialogue and its skein of arguments at the expense of music and the choir—in short, who excluded the original Dionysian element from tragedy: “. . . to reconstruct tragedy purely on the basis of an un-Dionysian art, morality, and world view. . . .”<sup>58</sup> What is tested, then, is the very *Apollonian clarity* that obstructs access to the Dionysian vision of the world and to the joy of beautiful appearances. It is the *Socratic aesthetic* or the dialectical optimist who, by way of his go-between Euripides, dissociates the Apollonian element from the Dionysian and kills tragedy. One could say that Socrates “is the father of the logic possessing the most pronounced characteristics of pure science.

He has destroyed the musical drama that had brought together the threads of all ancient art.”<sup>59</sup> For dialectic, as science, is essentially optimistic, believing in cause and effect, a relation between crime and punishment, virtue and happiness. “The dialectic’s arithmetic operations leave no remainder; it cancels out everything that cannot be decomposed by its concepts.”<sup>60</sup>

Nietzsche realizes, however, that an anti-Dionysian tendency had already slipped little by little into tragedy even before Socrates, and that the predominance of dialogue and argumentation had made it more and more effective. In Sophocles, for example, one already experiences a displacement of the chorus by actors, which destroys its principal responsibility for creating the tragic effect, and thus contributes to its effacement in Euripides, Agathon and the new comedy.

If Nietzsche considers that the decline of tragedy reached its nadir with Euripides, it is compensated for by Sophocles and Aeschylus, both of whom fit the title of true tragic poets. But, in the end, it is Aeschylus who receives his nearly complete admiration. For it is Aeschylus who touched the surface of the most inexplicable and terrifying depths of myth. There is a difference between Sophocles and Aeschylus, though: in Sophocles, one is made aware of the glory of passivity; in Aeschylus, on the contrary, of the glory of activity. The hero of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus* patiently endures the excesses of his agonies, thus demonstrating that it is at the extreme limits of his passivity that he accedes to supreme activity—an activity to which all of his conscious deeds and gestures of the past have not led. Inversely, Aeschylus’s hero rises to titanic stature, gains culture by his own efforts and forces, and compels the gods to enter into an alliance with man, thus symbolizing the narrow and obscure link of mutual dependence that exists between men, particularly the artist, and the divine. Prometheus “found the defiant faith that he had the ability to create men and at least destroy the Olympian gods, by means of his superior wisdom which, to be sure, he had to atone for with eternal suffering.”<sup>61</sup> This is why Nietzsche sees in the sovereign *power* of the great genius and in the stern pride of the artist the content and soul of Aeschylus’s poem, while Sophocles’s *Oedipus* sounds as a prelude the saint’s song of triumph.

According to Nietzsche, the Promethean myth, which belongs, since its origin, to the Aryan community and evidences their gift for the profoundly tragic, has the same characteristic significance for the Aryan mentality as the myth of the fall has for the Semitic mentality. There exists between the two myths a family connection comparable to that between

brother and sister. Only—and this will explain the difference between the two myths—in the Promethean legend man does not receive fire as a gift from heaven as a blazing lightning bolt or the warming rays of the sun; rather, he feels himself free and capable of mastering fire because of a sacrilege, that is, an act paid for with consequences that involve “the whole flood of sufferings and sorrows with which the offended divinities have to afflict the nobly aspiring race of men.”<sup>62</sup>

This is a harsh idea which, by the *dignity* it confers on sacrilege, contrasts strangely with the Semitic myth of the fall in which curiosity, mendacious deception, susceptibility to seduction, lust—in short, a series of pre-eminently feminine affects was considered the origin of evil. What distinguishes the Aryan notion is the sublime view of *active sin* as the characteristically Promethean virtue. With that, the ethical basis for pessimistic tragedy has been found: the *justification* of human evil, meaning both human guilt and the human suffering it entails.<sup>63</sup>

The Promethean hero, in his titanic striding to destroy the barriers of individuation and to rise up as the unique essence of the world, reveals through his acts the interconnection of two worlds: those of the human and the divine. These two worlds, taken separately, have right on their side, but confronted by one another, they are condemned to suffer for their individuation. The hero, however, must take it on himself to suffer the consequences of his rebellion and his immeasurable pride: “. . . which means he commits sacrilege and suffers. Thus the Aryans understand sacrilege as something masculine, while the Semites understand sin as feminine, just as the original sacrilege is committed by a man, the original sin by a woman.”<sup>64</sup>

After this digression, which is necessary for Nietzsche to establish his view of the tragic, comes the question of the death of tragedy by the dialectical optimist or the Socratic aesthetic. For, according to Nietzsche, even if an anti-Dionysian tendency was in the air before Socrates, it was with him that this tendency reached an unprecedented fullness.

Indeed, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Socrates is presented as the model of the theoretical man, in whom the logical nature has developed in such an unbridled and excessive way that one can find a parallel only in the most powerful instinctive forces:

In this utterly abnormal nature, instinctive wisdom appears only to *hinder* conscious knowledge occasionally. While in all productive men it is

instinct that is the creative-affirmative force, and consciousness acts critically and dissuasively, in Socrates it is instinct that becomes the critic, and consciousness that becomes the creator—truly a monstrosity *per defectum*!<sup>65</sup>

For Socrates, then, tragedy represents something unreasonable, a mere semblance of truth, “full of causes apparently without effects, and effects apparently without causes.”<sup>66</sup> He reckoned tragedy among the flattering arts that portray only the agreeable, not the useful, and thus as something that can only be addressed to people “who are not very bright” (*Verstand*). In this Socratic universe, where tragic poetry no longer has the freedom of the city, it serves no purpose other than to revert to the new literary forms and be expressed, for example, in the forms of the Platonic dialogue:

If tragedy had absorbed into itself all the earlier types of art, the same might also be said in an eccentric sense of the Platonic dialogue which, a mixture of all the extant styles and forms, hovers midway between narrative, lyric, and drama, between prose and poetry, and so has also broken the strict old law of the unity of linguistic form.<sup>67</sup>

But the question posed presently, and to which Nietzsche tries to produce a response, is that of knowing if between Socratism and art, between science and tragedy, or between theoretical and tragic man, there is *necessarily*, and simply, an antagonistic relation. And, further, if one can, in the end, conceive of an “artistic Socrates.”

In fact, at the end of chapter 14 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche invokes passages from the *Phaedo*, where the imprisoned Socrates relates to his friends an apparition from a recurring dream that always urges: “practice music.” Socrates, who up until then considered his philosophy to be the highest in the art of the muses, gives in, in the end, to the warning of a dream and starts to practice that contemptible popular music to which, however, the god urged him. Perhaps, asks Nietzsche, these words that Socrates has heard in a dream represent the only sign of a scruple or hesitation regarding the limits of logic. And in following this line of questioning, Nietzsche re-creates Socrates’ own thoughts: “Perhaps—thus he must have asked himself—what is not intelligible to me is not necessarily unintelligent? Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled? Perhaps art is even a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science?”<sup>68</sup> For Socrates’ influence, “that has spread over posterity like a