



Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy

Ali Reda

The death of Greek tragedy left a great void whose effects were felt profoundly, far and wide; as once Greek sailors in Tiberius' time heard the distressing cry 'the god Pan is dead' issuing from a lonely island, now, throughout the Hellenic world, this cry resounded like an agonized lament: 'Tragedy is dead! Poetry itself died with it! Away, away with you, puny, stunted imitators! Away with you to Hades, and eat your fill of the old masters' crumbs!'

Nietzsche states that the creation of art depends on a conflict between two opposing forces, each battling for control over the existence of humanity, the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian", yet neither side ever prevails eternally, a natural balance always occurs. Apollo is the Greek god of light and reason, characterized by a measured restraint which reinforces a strong form of individualization. Dionysus is the Greek god of wine and music, characterized by a frenzy of self-forgetting embracing its chaos and nihilism in which it dissolves in a primal unity with others and with nature. For example, the Promethean myth, with its theme of active striving against the bounds of natural law, is strongly Dionysian. However, in its yearning for justice, the Promethean myth is also Apollonian.

Wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was checked and destroyed... wherever the first Dionysian onslaught was successfully withstood, the authority and majesty of the Delphic god Apollo exhibited itself as more rigid and menacing than ever.

Form is Apollonian, since form individualizes objects; thus, sculpture is the most Apollonian form of arts. Rational thought is also Apollonian since it is structured and makes distinctions, but those objects are a phenomena so they are the world as "representation" or illusion or a dream. Schopenhauer distinguishes between objects by his principium individuationis, which means that separate objects occupy discrete portions of space-time. And since the noumenal is beyond time and space it is therefore one and undifferentiable; plurality can't apply to it and this noumenal is the conception of the world as "will" or reality which is Dionysian. Drunkenness, madness, ecstasy and all forms of enthusiasm are Dionysian as they break down a man's individual self, for in such states man gives up his individuality and submerges himself in a greater whole. Since music appeals directly to man's instinctive, chaotic emotions and not to his formally reasoning mind, therefore it is the most Dionysian form of arts.

There is an old legend that king Midas for a long time hunted the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, in the forests, without catching him. When Silenus finally fell into the king's hands, the king asked what was the best thing of all for men, the very finest. The daemon remained silent, motionless and inflexible, until, compelled by the king, he finally broke out into shrill laughter and said these words, "Suffering creature, born for a day, child of accident and toil, why are you forcing me to say what would give you the greatest pleasure not to hear? The very best thing for you is totally unreachable: not to have been born, not to exist, to be nothing. The second best thing for you, however, is this—to die soon."

The combination of these elements in one form of art gave birth to tragedy. The Apollonian element gave form to the Dionysian rituals of music, dance and passion which manifested in the the chorus being satyrs, making it a coherent piece of art.

“Here the illusion of culture was wiped away by the primordial image of man; here the real man revealed himself, the bearded satyr, who cried out with joy to his god.”

The audience participated with and as the chorus. What the Greeks saw on stage was the incarnation of their united primal consciousness. The Apollonian element was found in the dialogue and actors so the audience have an Apollonian dream vision of themselves, of the energy they’re embodying. The Apollonian appearances represent a vision that the chorus generates and then celebrates in song. For Nietzsche, the chorus is the only reality of the drama.

“Art approaches, as a saving, healing magician. Art alone can turn those thoughts of disgust at the horror or absurdity of existence into imaginary constructs which permit living to continue.”

Appearance (Apollonian) is essential to shield them from the truth of human suffering (Dionysian) and save them from despair which otherwise would destroy them. The two main aspects of a tragedy are music and the tragic hero. The hero carries the suffering of the tragedy on his shoulders and thus absolves us from our burden of reality. By preparing himself for a higher existence through his own destruction, not his victories, The tragic hero serves as an example for us to accept our defeat because it is the only way to redeem ourselves. The Dionysian element of music, makes us realize that the hero is only a phenomenon, and that his existence cannot be destroyed by his death. Thus the Greek find self-affirmation not in another life, but in the terror and ecstasy of the performance of tragedies so man could live creatively in optimistic harmony with the sufferings of life. This relation emphasizes the harmony that can be found within one’s chaotic experience. Art becomes a necessity for existence.

“We cannot help but see Socrates as the turning-point, the vortex of world history”

For Nietzsche, the golden age of Greek tragedy ended by Euripides and Socrates. Rather than presenting tragic heroes, Euripides reduced the use of the chorus and gave his characters all the weaknesses of ordinary human beings, making it more reflective of the realities of daily life. Socrates insisted that there must be reasons to justify everything and that reason opposed instinct. In his view, instinct is a lack of insight and wrongful acts are a lack of knowledge.

But for Socrates, tragedy did not even seem to “tell what’s true”, quite apart from the fact that it addresses “those without much wit”, not the philosopher: another reason for giving it a wide berth. Like Plato, he numbered it among the flattering arts which represent only the agreeable, not the useful, and therefore required that his disciples abstain most rigidly from such unphilosophical stimuli — with such success that the young tragedian, Plato, burnt his writings in order to become a pupil of Socrates.

For Nietzsche, rationality makes life meaningless because it does nothing to justify existence and the world. Life finds meaning only through art because it is the only thing that brings us to a deeper level of experience than rationality. The world is meaningful, not as objects of knowledge but as artistic experiences.

“it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”

Nietzsche describes the Naive Artist (the Apollonian artist) as the one who creates forms that have the most beautiful appearances; for example Homer is the greatest naive artist, but

he is inferior to the tragic artist (the Dionysian artist), but also superior to the operatic artist (the Socratic culture artist). Opera is the greatest manifestation of art in the the Socratic culture in Nietzsche's opinion, because in opera speech is mixed with music to form a semi-song. However, because the singer is torn between speaking clearly and showing his musical talent as a singer, his art is neither Apollonian nor Dionysian.

Nietzsche calls those works of the Naive Artist "an illusion of an illusion", the first illusion is the representation of our real world and the second one is the Apollonian element in the work of art itself. For example, Raphael's painting, "Transfiguration", represents two states of appearance.



In his Transfiguration, the bottom half shows us, with the possessed boy, the despairing porters, the helplessly frightened disciples, the mirror image of the eternal primordial pain, the sole basis of the world. The "illusion" here is the reflection of the eternal contradiction, of the father of things. Now, out of this illusion there rises up, like an ambrosial fragrance, a new world of illusion, like a vision, invisible to those trapped in the first scene—something illuminating and hovering in the purest painless ecstasy, a shining vision to contemplate with eyes wide open.

Nietzsche distinguishes between three kinds of culture: the Alexandrian, or Socratic (rational thinking to save the world); the Hellenic, or artistic (mirroring beauty by illusion); and the Buddhist, or tragic (with its longing for nothingness and absence of will). We belong to an Alexandrian culture which makes us slaves of reason and so it's bound for self-destruction because it doesn't fulfill the chaos inside man. Man will remain eternally hungry until he revolts on those foundations of reason.

People should take note: Alexandrian culture requires a slave class in order to be able to exist over time, but with its optimistic view of existence, it denies the necessity for such a

class and thus, when the effect of its beautiful words of seduction and reassurance about the “dignity of human beings” and the “dignity of work” has worn off, it gradually moves towards a horrific destruction. There is nothing more frightening than a barbarian slave class which has learned to think of its existence as an injustice and is preparing to take revenge, not only for itself, but for all generations.

The only way to rescue our modern culture from this destructive fate is to revive the Dionysian spirit. Nietzsche sees hope in Richard Wagner, because he creates music that expresses the deepest urges of the human will. For Nietzsche this is the first step in the rebirth of tragedy.

But what changes come upon the weary desert of our culture, so darkly described, when it is touched by the magic of Dionysus! A storm seizes everything decrepit, rotten, broken, stunted; shrouds it in a whirling red cloud of dust and carries it into the air like a vulture. In vain confusion we seek for all that has vanished; for what we see has risen as if from beneath the earth into the gold light, so full and green, so luxuriantly alive, immeasurable and filled with yearning. Tragedy sits in sublime rapture amidst this abundance of life, suffering and delight, listening to a far-off, melancholy song which tells of the Mothers of Being, whose names are Delusion, Will, Woe. Yes, my friends, join me in my faith in this Dionysiac life and the rebirth of tragedy. The age of Socratic man is past: crown yourselves with ivy, grasp the thyrsus and do not be amazed if tigers and panthers lie down fawning at your feet. Now dare to be tragic men, for you will be redeemed. You shall join the Dionysian procession from India to Greece! Gird yourselves for a hard battle, but have faith in the miracles of your god!

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