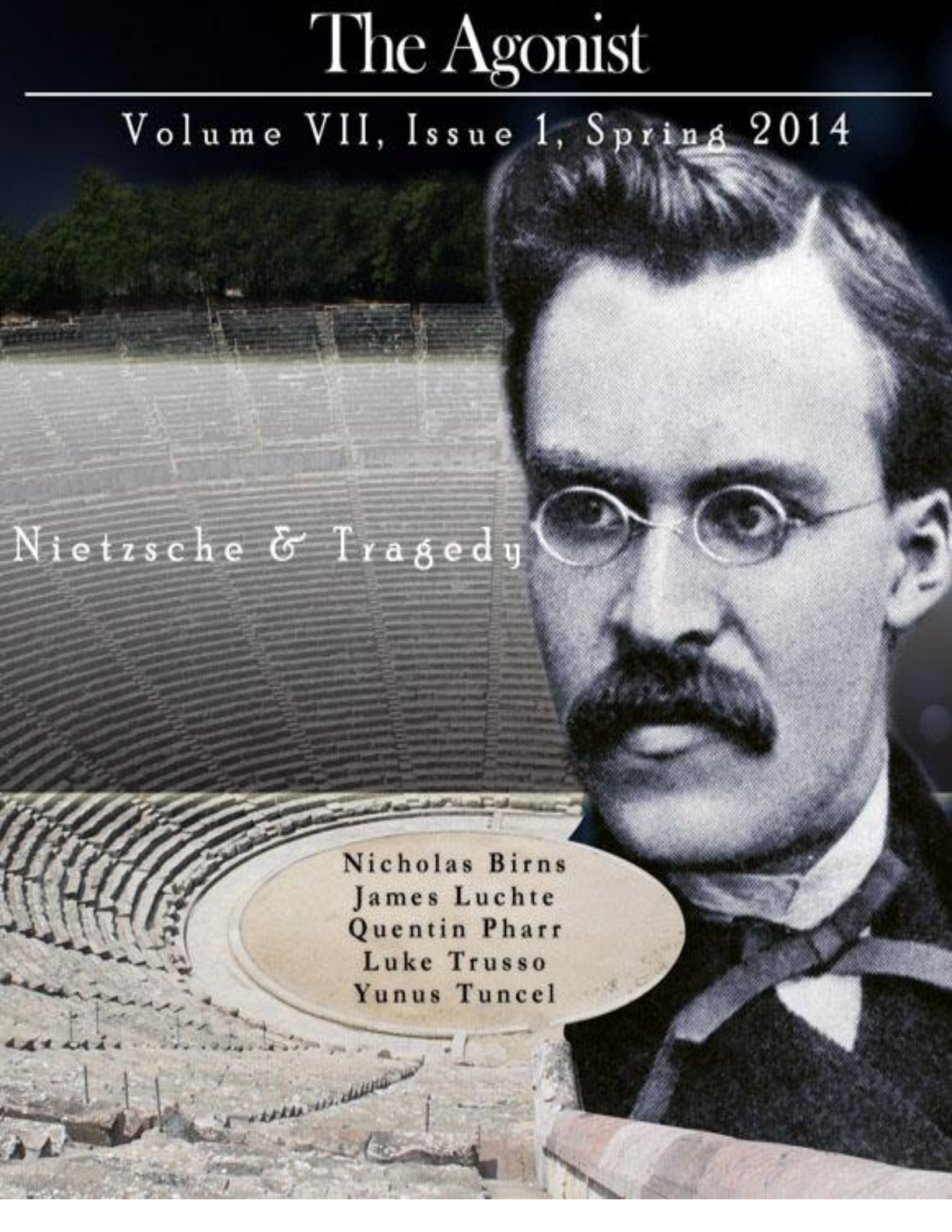


The Agonist

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Nietzsche & Tragedy



Nicholas Birns
James Luchte
Quentin Pharr
Luke Trusso
Yunus Tuncel

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Editors' Introduction

Dear Readers,

We are pleased to present the latest issue of *The Agonist*. This collection of essays examines Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and different aspects of Nietzsche's conception of the tragic through the prism of ancient Greek skepticism, environmental philosophy and ancient Greek cult practices. Our work grew out of a panel discussion on Nietzsche and Tragedy at Mercy College in the spring 2014. Also included is an essay by James Luchte on Nietzsche and Maoism as well as a review of Frank Chouraqui's *Ambiguity and the Absolute: Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty on the Question of Truth* by Nicholas Burns. We look forward to your thoughts and comments, tragic or otherwise. Thank you.

NC Editors, July 2014

The Tragic Community

Friedrich Nietzsche and Mao Tse Tung

James Luchte

Abstract: Contradiction, in this Hegelian sense, is productive - Hegel tells us that we must 'think contradiction'. He appropriated this notion in this non-analytic sense from Heraclitus (with Hölderlin and Schelling). Indeed, as I will show, the relationship between Nietzsche's contest between Dionysus and Apollo and Mao's indication of 'contradiction' finds its family resemblance in their own respective rootedness in early Greek thought and its topography of the 'unity of opposites.' The meaning of 'contradiction', as it is used in Mao - given his Marxian, Leninist and Hegelian ancestors - is a 'dialectical' contradiction, which, in its various manifestations in Hölderlin, Schelling, Schlegel, Niethammer, and Hamann, among others, is an early German romantic appropriation and interpretation of the early Greek notion of the *logos* as a unity of opposites. This appropriation was also the cradle in which Nietzsche was raised. This essay examines contradiction within the context of the tragic.

With those two gods of art, Apollo and Dionysus, we link our recognition that in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast, in origins and purposes, between visual (plastic) arts, the Apollonian, and the non-visual art of music, the Dionysian. Both very different drives go hand in hand, for the most part in open conflict with each other and simultaneously provoking each other all the time to new and more powerful offspring, in order to perpetuate for themselves the contest of opposites which the common word "Art" only seems to bridge, until they finally, through a marvelous metaphysical act, seem to pair up with each other and, as this pair, produce Attic tragedy, just as much a Dionysian as an Apollonian work of art.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872

Contradiction is universal and absolute, it is present in the process of development of all things and permeates every process from beginning to end. (II)

By the former we mean that contradiction exists in and runs through all processes from beginning to end; motion, things, processes, thinking -- all are contradictions. To deny contradiction is to deny everything. This is a

universal truth for all times and all countries, which admits of no exception.
(III)

Mao Tse Tung, *On Contradiction* (1937)

Mao's Ontology and Early Greek Thought

Contradiction, for Mao, abides at the heart of all things – within each particular being and amidst the universality of the cosmos, or the All. Contradiction is the existence of all things - the birth, life and death of all things, and of the incessant re-birth of all particular kinds of thing, or being. Contradiction consists in, and gains its immense power from, a unity of opposites. Mao describes this disunited, or dialectical, unity of opposites:

The interdependence of the contradictory aspects present in all things and the struggle between these aspects determine the life of all things and push their development forward. There is nothing that does not contain contradiction; without contradiction nothing would exist. (Mao Tse Tung, *On Contradiction*, II)

Contradiction is the *modus essendi*, *modus existendi* and *modus operandi* of all things. It is the reality, actuality and existence of all things. The primary axiomatic significance of the universality of contradiction, a notion confirmed for Mao by Hegel and Marx, is that change is ubiquitous to all things, and thus, nothing can or will ever remain the same.

Contradiction, as the root of change, it must be remembered, therefore, entails that all arrangements, whether they be scientific, philosophical, political, economic and cultural are subject to the insurmountable necessity of change, and are merely the temporary manifestations of contradiction, of the 'dialectical' unity, or struggle, of opposites.

One of the most powerful implications of this philosophy of existence, that of contradiction, is that all things come into being or pass away through a struggle of opposites. This consequence assures us that not only is the current state of affairs a product of history, but that it will also pass

away in this struggle, that it too will have its own history. Hegel and Marx, long before Mao, had each placed contradiction at the heart of their systems of philosophy and history. Hegel appropriated contradiction, this ancient notion, from the early Greek thinkers, as a means for an explanation of the development of the stages of history up to the end of history which was that of Hegel's own life and death within the Prussian state.

Contradiction, in this Hegelian sense, is productive - Hegel tells us that we must 'think contradiction'. He appropriated this notion in this non-analytic sense from Heraclitus (with Hölderlin and Schelling). Indeed, as I will show, the relationship between Nietzsche's contest between Dionysus and Apollo and Mao's indication of 'contradiction' finds its family resemblance in their own respective rootedness in early Greek thought and its topography of the 'unity of opposites.' The meaning of 'contradiction', as it is used in Mao - given his Marxian, Leninist and Hegelian ancestors - is a 'dialectical' contradiction, which, in its various manifestations in Hölderlin, Schelling, Schlegel, Niethammer, and Hamann, among others, is an early German romantic appropriation and interpretation of the early Greek notion of the *logos* as a unity of opposites. This appropriation was also the cradle in which Nietzsche was raised.

From the perspective of Heraclitus, the *logos* as the dynamic, productive 'unity of opposites' is comparable to the post-Kantian conception of contradiction and 'dialectics', especially as much of post-Kantianism was a renaissance for early Greek thought. In this context, there would be a productive contradiction between the unity of opposites Dionysus and Apollo, and it is precisely productive since it is a unity of 'opposites'. This does not, however, limit Nietzsche to the entire range of other features of Hegelian philosophy. We are delving in the current writing into the Western re-appropriation of the early Greek philosophers in the Romantic and Post-Romantic periods, Nietzsche and Hegel being two of the original explorers. We delve, moreover, since the

questions of these periods, and the revolution of thought which had occurred, are still our own questions and our own revolutionary habitat in which we struggle.

It should be made clear that this sense of the term 'contradiction' is an analytically impossible situation, from a post-Aristotelian context as its logic merely focuses, as Carnap did in his unenlightened criticisms of Heidegger, upon mere negation, in its static sense. The early German (and with Coleridge, Shelley, British) Romantic notion of contradiction, dialectics, on the contrary, engenders movement, which is a development that is also linked to their radically temporal criticism of Spinoza and his static Absolute.

In this way, we are looking at Mao through the lens of Nietzsche and amidst the habitat of the early Greek pagan philosophers, seeking to comprehend 'contradiction' in its non-analytic and 'dialectical', or perhaps 'ecstatic' sense (which after all comes from the early German romantic poet-philosopher Hölderlin) so as to better comprehend our finite, human existence, and perhaps, be capable of a marvellous 'metaphysical act' of our own .

One must think contradiction, Hegel said. Marx, on the other hand, not only employed contradiction to explain history as the history of class struggle, but also deployed contradiction as a prospective strategic tool for the navigation of the revolutionary process in its infancy. That which both of these seminal thinkers share, however, is not only the notion that all things are imbued with contradiction, but that at some point, however, there would emerge a state of affairs in which contradiction would be overcome or resolved. For Hegel, as mentioned, the contradiction was resolved with the emergence of the Prussian state as the symbol of the 'end of history.' For Marx, of course, the end state or eschatological resolution of contradiction, conceived as the birth of a new humanity, of authentic human history, is that historical *telos* of communism, that movement which will tear down the prison bars and allow a new world to be born.

Mao, in contradistinction to these thinkers, did not believe that contradiction could be resolved in this way, or that contradiction is merely an indication of a state of change that will at some point come to an end according to the providential destiny of a final cause or goal (*Telos*). This notion that contradiction cannot be overcome, indeed, that it is the very 'truth' itself comes very close to Georges Bataille, who writes in his posthumous novel *The Dead Man*, "I believe that truth has only one face: that of a violent contradiction." (*The Deadman*, Penguin, 2012) This quote, not published until 1967, is reminiscent of Bataille's 1929 dispute with the Surrealist Andre Breton, who, also being a Trotskyite Marxist, expelled Bataille from the Surrealist Group in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto*, advocating what he poetically intimated as an 'Icarian' overcoming of contradiction, one speculated through the philosophy of Hegel.

Bataille, on the contrary, held, against such a notion of 'system', of reconciliation, that there would always be a dissident remainder, a 'sovereign', abject (Kristeva) power of 'base matter' that was indigestible to 'system,' and thus, that any notion of complete and finished (perfected) 'system' is merely an Apollonian illusion. Such an illusion is grounded upon the false and in fact dangerous, nihilistic notion of the grand synthetic overcoming of contradiction (which in this case is the Dionysian). As Mao had written in his 1937 essay, in agreement with Bataille, contradiction abides in each particular and amidst the universal All, and that without it, not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would continue to exist. The 'unity of opposites', as the early Greek thinkers held, is the condition for all life, but not on the model of sexuality with the synthesis being the child, but as that which Nietzsche affirms as the tension of a bow which is at the heart of all things, and which will propel us toward our target in the future. Mao writes:

What is meant by the emergence of a new process? The old unity with its constituent opposites yields to a new unity with its constituent opposites, whereupon a new process emerges to replace the old. The old process ends and the new one begins. The new process contains new contradictions and

begins its own history of the development of contradictions. (Mao Tse Tung, *On Contradiction*, II)

For Mao, there is never a time, a history, beyond contradiction - no life, culture, state, science or philosophy which is without contradiction, and consists of these contradictions, the temporary resolutions of which not only account for revolutionary change, but also give rise to a new circumstance of contradiction. For Mao, contradiction would even subsist in the political economic state of communism, and within the communist party itself. It is in this way that Mao parts ways with thinkers such as Hegel and Marx to the extent that their respective philosophies remain within the Western Judeo-Christian paradigm of salvation, of the *telos* or eschatology of repose. For Mao, such a permanent resolution of contradiction would be to surrender to the ever-present possibility of death. A life, culture, and state dies when there is no longer the affirmation and cultivation of contradiction and diversity.

In his departure from the ultimately static philosophies of Hegel and Marx, Mao remains ever more faithful to the original notion of the 'unity of opposites' of the early Greek thinkers, such as Heraclitus and Empedocles - and to Nietzsche. Or, perhaps, it could be suggested, in light of the fact that at the time of the early Greeks there was not yet a clear severance between East and West, that Mao remains faithful to the originary impulse of philosophy that is also incarnated in the philosophy of the Tao. There are many similarities between Taoism, early Greek thought, and Mao's open-ended dialectical notion of contradiction. Contradiction always remains, just as the play of the Yin and Yang and the 'unity of opposites' are always the condition of reality, actuality and existence.

That which these perspectives share is the resolute affirmation of the tragic condition of human existence, an affirmation that is not only without either the cowardice of escapism or the weariness of an exhausted desire for repose, for sleep, for death, but actively struggles against

these nihilistic forces. It should be remembered that contemporary Western philosophy has long since rejected the contradictory state of affairs of its origins, and with its laws of identity, contradiction, and excluded middle, it systematically designates the unity of opposites and of dialectical contradiction as states of error, falsity.

It is such a logical impasse, that of the foundational exclusion of the ‘middle’, of the in between of contradiction, which primarily reveals the current diremption and discordance between the East and the West with respect to thought, science, culture and political theories and practises. Yet, after all is said and done, such a state of affairs is itself a state of contradiction, and of struggle, whether Western analytical or identity philosophy accepts it or not. That which is essential for Mao is the thoughtful enlightenment entailed in this notion of the universality of contradiction, and of the interaction of thought and material conditions manifest in *praxis*.

For, while contradiction will never disappear, even in the postulated communist society, that which is essential is the ability to discern contradictions on a universal and particular scale, and to be able to act on the basis of this discernment. A society which recognizes the necessity of change is a tragic community, but one, once having this enlightenment, can gaze at the wreckage of history and say, with Nietzsche, ‘Thus, I willed it!’, a community which can map the complex network of contradiction that is the topography for the navigation of a community throughout its tenuous and uncertain existence. For while being may determine thought, the latter itself is necessary and has its own power.

Nietzsche’s Aesthetics as a Philosophy of Tragic Existence

It is in this context that we enter into the main topic of this essay, although glimpses and hints can be traced in the previous discussion. This topic is the explicit interface between Mao and Nietzsche, who share the primary tenets of the essence of a historical, tragic community and of the

conditions for emergence, development, transition, revolution, and demise (and possible rebirth where conditions apply). The text that most concurs with this line of thought is Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

While this text is usually associated with the academic discipline known as 'aesthetics' – and thus, not with any enquiry into the 'serious' discernment of the complex contradictions of existence – this association may be primarily due to the limited and, as Heidegger suggests, decadent state of aesthetics in the modern world, where it is narrowly associated with artworks and the intellectual culture of the art industry. In fact, the original meaning of 'aesthetics' – a word promoted by Baumgarten – is that of aesthesia, which concerns the ability to perceive, of sensibility, within the conditions of space and time.

Kant still held firm to this notion in the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in his *Critique of Judgement*, where he designated the aesthetic as the temporal, imaginal domain of existence, the self-suppression of which in the struggle of the sublime, leads to pure reason itself (a pure reason that still must be supplemented by the necessary horizons of possible experience, which are those of space and time).

Considered in this light, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* is a philosophy of tragic existence, a philosophy of existential contradiction which articulates the birth, life and death (and possible rebirth) of a culture or human state of affairs. In his seminal work, Nietzsche is ostensibly concerned with the birth of the specific art form of ancient Greek tragedy, of tragic poetry and tragic drama. For Nietzsche, such a pre-eminent form of artistic, human expression is possible due to a temporary resolution, a brief marriage, of the contradictory 'natural artistic forces' of the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

As we have seen from the quote at the head of the essay, Nietzsche traces the genealogy of the emergence of this unique culture (which was also associated with the birth of originary philosophy in the early Greek thinkers) and the tragic death of this culture with the Socratism of the ‘theoretical man’ which was the imposition of order over exuberant life, of mere form over matter, of control over the risk of uncertainty, of repetition over creativity. Since these are forces of nature, and that the suppression of the Dionysian by the Apollonian is symptomatic of a particular historicity and condition of a specific culture, it is clear that Nietzsche’s intention is not merely to remain on the level of ‘aesthetics’ in the modern sense.

Nietzsche contends that tragedy begins with the chorus, which is the community itself in its musical, intoxicated ecstasy of the Dionysian dance of existence. It denotes the celebration and affirmation of the community in the eroticism and interconnectedness of human life and the life of the cosmos, the life of which is always constituted by the unity of opposites. In the specific case of ancient Greek tragedy, the central contradiction emerges with the rise of the Apollonian, of the individuation of the tragic hero and of the authentic beginning of drama proper. That which this dramatic moment intimates is that which Walter Burkert has referred to as the ‘orientalisation’ of ancient Greek culture around the 6th century B.C., an advent of cultural interaction, inaugurating a century of transfiguration.

Burkert, in his *The Orientalizing Revolution*, exhibits the life of the Dionysian East which had infiltrated the rigid Doric culture of the Homeric West, and it was this marriage of opposites, of East and West that gave rise to one of the greatest revolutions of culture and the emergence of one of the most profound art forms, that of tragedy. If we consider in this context Nietzsche’s *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, we can also contend that this marriage of opposites

also gave rise to tragic philosophy itself – the philosophy of tragic existence, one, as we have already indicated, that is shared by the early Greeks, Taoism, Nietzsche and Mao.

From a philosophical perspective, tragic thought intimates the emergence of the singular individual from out of the community, to live and eventually to succumb to the limits of finitude and thus to return to the community, to the site of primordial creativity. In light of the notion of tragedy, and hence tragic existence, the Dionysian gives rise to the Apollonian, only for the Apollonian to return to the primordial womb of the Dionysian. In the mythography of Dionysus, a god of wine and of vegetation, the deep essence of the community abides during the incessant rising and falling of the individuals, just as the leaves of the tree bud, grow, but soon wither and die, returning back to the earth.

Yet, the tree, even in the time of winter, of death remains alive, and with the spring, gives rise again to the myriad singularities of the leaves. A philosophy of tragic existence is one that acknowledges and affirms this eternal cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth, one that is rooted in the tragic community and one that does not seek an escape from this mortal coil.

For Nietzsche, the culture and philosophy of the tragic Greek community died with, as I have suggested, the emergence of the ‘theoretical man.’ That which constitutes this emergence is the tyrannical suppression of the Dionysian, of the community, by an Apollonian which no longer recognizes either its origin in the Dionysian community, or its confinement in the tragic cycle of the eternal recurrence of the same. This Apollo, the one who has extirpated his half-brother Dionysus, seeks to escape the mortal coil, the fate of the singular with respect to the tragic community.

Nietzsche called Christianity ‘Platonism for the people,’ and its significance in the context of our current discussion is the foundation of a culture – Western, Roman culture – which seeks to

suppress the Dionysian, to exalt the individual and the salvation of the individual soul – it replaces uncertainty with faith, tragedy with comedy, which unlike the terrible destination of the tragic, sets forth a predictably happy ending. In this way, the culture of the merely Apollonian is the culture of the dream, of the redemptive artwork which shields the individual in an illusion which suppresses any acknowledgement of the terrible truth of existence and the insurmountability of death and uncertainty.

Deleuze suggested some time ago that the capitalist West is a pathological culture of a necessary schizophrenia, a culture of the dream which has become dis-associated with Reality. The illusion of such a state of affairs is orchestrated by that which Adorno designates as the ‘Culture Industry’ and Chomsky indicates as the ‘manufacture of consent’, of the ceaseless reproduction of necessary illusions. That which this ‘society of the spectacle’ (Guy Debord) indicates is an Apollonian culture which has become divorced from the social context of the community, of the tragic, Dionysian horizon of human existence.

Such a pathology should serve as a warning to the ‘history of the present.’ (Foucault) A culture, for instance, which cultivates the new contradictions of the empty formalism of Apollonian individuality and private ownership will become increasingly divorced from its roots in the community and will respond to the dissociative disturbances amongst the people (due to the neglect of the heterogeneous community) with ever increasing ‘theoretical’ and homogenising forms of command, control and suppression – it will lead and has led to fascism and various totalitarian configurations.

On the other hand, the philosophy of tragic existence will also serve as a warning to social and cultural forms which suppress individuality and its freedom of creation and expression. We

must remember that the tragic culture of the early Greeks, and of philosophy in the tragic age of the Greeks, arose due to the fateful marriage of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, of the community and the individual, the life-giving contradiction of which constitutes the tragic community as such.

Mao and Nietzsche both acknowledged the necessary contradiction of the Dionysian and the Apollonian as the natural forces which give birth to the tragic community, a community of honesty and health, one capable of charting the course of stormy seas due to its openness to truth, creativity, free expression, and the social context and finitude of human existence. Mao and Nietzsche both counsel that one must overcome oneself until he or she can teach the teacher, to achieve the enlightenment of 'thinking for oneself' (Kant) and the dignity of one whose existence, while only temporary, participates in the grand culture of a great society.

The Two Paths

Robert Frost describes two paths in his 1920 poem 'The Road Not Taken', two possibilities that beckon from the future, but are only seen through a glass darkly. As with Hölderlin, Heidegger and Bataille, our existence is that of a radical temporality, of finite human existence standing out amidst the openness of perspective. Not only is contradiction at the heart of all things, but also uncertainty. Each decision that is made will necessarily have unpredictable, perhaps irretrievable, consequences. Let us first listen to Frost's poem:

The Road Not Taken

TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

No one can know the truth of tomorrow. That is why it is vitally important that decisions be made wisely, with thought, and with the consultation of all others who are involved in a situation. A decision concerning the introduction of capitalist property relations, for instance, is one that cannot be taken lightly. One is at the fork in the road, one looks down each way far as he can, but one does not know the future. The wrong decision could lead to catastrophe, dissension, and the loss of that which is essential to the life of the people and community.

From a global perspective, it would seem that the world is plainly constituted, agitated by a complex web of contradictions, of conflict and incommensurability. National, political economic, geo-political differences and contestations, but yet, there is an essential cooperation, and even a mixture of ideas that stray from the pure ideological stereotypes. In this way, much of the stable Western economies practice State involvement, there are welfare provisions, but, the tide continues to turn as the Right targets these last 'socialistic' aspects, which are now under threat as capitalism arrives at its latest stage, that of oligarchy, a new enclosure movement, which separates the people from public resources.

On the other hand, China, ostensibly a communist country has experimented successfully with intensive capital growth through the market-oriented reforms of Deng Xiaoping since 1978, yet, is predictably experiencing many of the negative results of industrialism which Europe and America discovered in the last century, i.e., environment degradation, income inequality, labour disputes, and the *spectacle* of Chinese billionaires. These new contradictions, arising out of the transformation of the Chinese economy after the death of Mao, have the potential of being exploited by rivals and enemies alike, such as the USA, Japan, and the KMT in the 'Republic of China' in Taiwan. The danger, of course, is that these contradictions may return China to the state of chaos, conflict and civil war that was widespread before 1949. One finds such a defence of the revolution in the Chinese New Left. One often does not know what one had until he or she has lost it.

For the time being, the Communist Party will continue to guide these global developments, but it is vital that they do not forget that they are still socialists. Many of the solutions to problems of the West actually lie in socialist ideas and practices, and the Chinese should be aware that they have much more to offer the West than another bail-out. Indeed, it is only a very small percentage of the population (1%), who in the West have ever benefited from capitalism. It would be best to remain at least somewhat sceptical of the smiling, shiny, happy faces in the cultural propaganda. We have all seen *Triumph of the Will*.

It would be a shame if China lost its soul to capitalism, a 'system', though contradictory like all other things and states of affairs, operates in a manner that is not ultimately subject to democratic control, to the control of the people, in whatever manner they may choose to organise themselves, including Confucianism. The problem, of course, is that the *demos*, the workers, do not own the capital, and can never technically own capital, since capital itself is a relation of

domination and exploitation. State and private capitalism behave according to the logic of a cancer cell. Such systems need to be abolished, swept from the earth.

Perhaps in a world which is built out of contradictions, and one at such a crossroads, we should dare to choose the path of the road that is less trodden – that of a truly Democratic Community – global democratic communist governance - developing a grand dialectical synthesis of the best aspects of the Global paradigms for social, political and political economic life. To take *the road less trodden* – that of a community of the people, as in the ancient Greek *demos*, in which all would be secure in the peace of mind that each has a stake and a voice in the community – a community owned and lived by the people (perhaps, an 'Athens without Slavery', facilitated by a coherent system of employee/worker ownership and direct self-management at the point of production).

Such a genuine advance can and will only occur on a global scale. Such a perspective would moreover be quite fitting in light of the fact that all of the major problems of our era are not only global in nature, but will require all of the members of the global community to solve them. We can accomplish this Global Alternative, however, only in the act of building an international democratic community of the people, one in which each person has a genuine stake, voice and capacity for action, just as all the others.

In his unwisely neglected 1843 Introduction to a *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which can be read productively with his other 1844 *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx called democracy the 'generic constitution' in the context of his outline of an explicit philosophy and political economy of 'Democratic Communism', a non-alienated way of life (shared ownership) in which true democracy would be the same as true communism. Marx writes:

Democracy relates to all other forms of the state as their Old Testament.
Man does not exist because of the law but rather the law exists for the good

of man. Democracy is human existence, while in the other political forms man has only legal existence. That is the fundamental difference of democracy.

And:

Furthermore it is evident that all forms of the state have democracy for their truth, and for that reason are false to the extent that they are not democracy.

Now, Marx is not speaking here of some empty shell of a capitalist-controlled formal 'Western democracy', a regime which locks out the vast majority of its people from any actual self-government, but Democracy as a cooperative and class-less human existence, liberated from the corruption of class hegemony. This notion of a Democratic Communism is not a new idea, but was an organisation and movement, *The Democratic Communist Circle*, to which Bataille, who I mentioned above, belonged in the 1930's until he shifted his activity to fight against fascism with Andre Breton in the organisation *Contre Attaque* in 1937. The common ownership of our democracies - a true people's communism - would resolve this long lasting and damaging contradiction of the private ownership of the means of production, and as an authentic democracy, will allow for a dynamic and real-time navigation of a society in perpetual becoming.

Of course, as Nietzsche and Mao have warned us, there will always arise new contradictions. But, we will have at least overcome one of the most threatening and festering of the myriad contradictions, that manifested in the reckless and barbaric atrocities of global capitalism, authoritarian governments with pseudo-democratic human facades, illegitimate 'regimes' which have tarnished by their actions the very word 'democratic' - which, once again, does not mean Lockean private property or capitalist ownership, or oligarchy, or monarchy - but means, in its truth, the rule of the people.

Nietzsche said once in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, that mankind did not yet have a goal, that mankind has always built some great work that transcends itself as a people or community, like

the Great Wall of China, for instance. Today, I have set forth another such goal for mankind, a goal for a global, democratic communist society of governance –

Under the slogan, perhaps, of the 'Democratic Community of the World'.

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Socratic Optimism in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and Pyrrhonism

Quentin Pharr

Abstract: In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche attempts to show two conclusions: 1) pessimism is *not necessarily* a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts, and 2) optimism *can be* a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. He attempts to show these conclusions in order to undermine the distinction between pessimism and optimism, which is also a distinction concerning the attitude towards certain moral features in a society or culture. The dissolution of this distinction is a central assumption in many of his later works and is, thus, necessary. However, Nietzsche's attempt to show the second conclusion is not as steadfast as one would hope. Using controversial cultural analysis and historical analysis, Nietzsche's evidence is seemingly circumstantial and indirectly related. In this paper, I attempt to show that Pyrrhonism is a viable option for Nietzsche to easily show the second conclusion and, most importantly, maintain the dissolution of the distinction between pessimism and optimism. I argue this through two points: 1) Pyrrhonism is a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts, and 2) If Pyrrhonism is a sign of these negative goods, then Socratic optimism is a sign of them as well. Overall, if these two points can be demonstrated, then optimism can be a sign of the above negative conditions and, by extension, the distinction between pessimism and optimism remains dissolved.

1. Introduction

In his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," Nietzsche recalls one of the central questions from *The Birth of Tragedy*: "is pessimism *necessarily* a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts- as it once was in India and now is, to all appearances, among us "modern" men and Europeans?" (Nietzsche 17, § SC1). For most who have read *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's response is resoundingly negative. In other words, Nietzsche claims that it is not an essential property of pessimism that it must be an indication of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts.¹ In fact, looking to the Greeks, there is a concrete example of such pessimism in the form of tragedy that is not an indication of the aforementioned

¹ I take it that "essential properties" are those properties that an object or thing must have in order to be that object or thing.

conditions. Thus, it cannot necessarily be the case. However, this conclusion is not the most radical of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The more radical conclusion arrives as a result of Nietzsche addressing the inverse of his previous question: *can* optimism be a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts? If so, then there are sufficient grounds for claiming that the distinction between pessimism and optimism is undermined. And, of course, Nietzsche's response is resoundingly affirmative. Pointing to the optimism of Euripides and Socrates, Nietzsche attempts to show that optimism can be such a sign. Still, in primarily analyzing Socrates and Euripides, I find that Nietzsche's conclusion, which is necessary to undermine the distinction between pessimism and optimism, can be further, but better demonstrated elsewhere.² Specifically, I will show that Nietzsche's conclusion can be arrived at through Pyrrhonism, which I will argue is directly related to Socratic optimism.

2. Philosophical Pessimism and Optimism

At the onset, there is a distinction at play in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* that needs to be fleshed out: that of pessimism and optimism. Both terms are a substantial inheritance from Schopenhauer. But, it is only through a firm understanding and inversion of the consequences associated with this distinction presented by Schopenhauer that Nietzsche is ultimately able to show that historical contingency lies at the core of each term and that there are no ahistorical or essential properties that necessarily fix the meaning of these terms or necessarily entail certain claims about the world. As such, it is important to clarify the meaning of these terms to proceed with Nietzsche's argument and my own argument.

As associated with Schopenhauer, pessimism is an attitude associated with the negative characterization of existence as a result of the negative goods (or the impossibility of the positive) that accompany existence. These negative goods can be anything from pain, dissatisfaction, and ignorance to

² I will only focus on Socratic optimism in this paper.

humiliation, boredom, and grief. Ultimately, for Schopenhauer, this negative characterization of existence results in non-existence being intrinsically better than existence because non-existence has no goods accompanying it, whatsoever. Further, on a more concrete level, this conclusion entails the negation of one's Will-to-Live, which is the manifestation of Will that urges one to satisfy those ends related to your arbitrary and basic desires. Altogether, I take it that Schopenhauer's argument is as follows:

1. The Will is ceaselessly, yet blindly, striving to satisfy its ends.
2. But, there are no ends for the Will.
3. If the Will is ceaselessly, yet blindly, striving to satisfy its ends, when there are no ends for the Will, then the Will's satisfaction is impossible.
4. The Will's satisfaction is impossible (follows from 1, 2, 3).
5. If the Will's satisfaction is impossible, then existence is characterized by dissatisfaction and suffering as the result of this dissatisfaction.
6. Existence is characterized by dissatisfaction and suffering as a result of this dissatisfaction (follows from 4, 5).
7. If existence is characterized by dissatisfaction and suffering as a result of this dissatisfaction, then non-existence (which has no value) is intrinsically better than existence (which has negative value).
8. Therefore, non-existence is intrinsically better than existence (follows from 6, 7).

Schopenhauer then provides a few responses one might have to the negative condition of existence or one's pessimism. The most relevant for the purposes of this paper is to adopt a form of asceticism or denial of the Will-to-Live or nihilism. For either option, one must come to accept an attitude of suspension, resignation, and a lack of will. Or, in other words, one must come to deny the strivings of the Will towards the many ends of our arbitrary and basic desires that delude it. These ends can include anything from the accrual of knowledge, the possession of transcendence in art, the satisfaction of bodily desires, moral

achievement, and so on. Thus, having ceased the Will's striving, the Will arrives at composure or tranquility because it no longer strives and fails with the results of dissatisfaction and suffering. To illustrate such renunciation followed by tranquility, Schopenhauer provides Christian ascetics as prime examples (Schopenhauer §68 and §70). Now, we must turn to Nietzsche and the pessimism that is characterized in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Though the usage might be the same, Nietzsche's views on pessimism and the response one should adopt towards it differ substantially from Schopenhauer. Nietzsche holds that it does not follow necessarily from a negative characterization of existence that there are grounds for thinking non-existence is intrinsically better than existence or that there is a negation of the Will-to-Live. On the contrary, it is a matter of historical contingency, particularly through certain institutions or ideas, that such a relationship has been established. Looking elsewhere in history, we can see examples of a negative characterization of existence that indicate an affirmation of existence and the Will-to-Live. For Nietzsche, the Greeks and the tragedies they produced were the best example of this claim. Thus, pessimism can be a sign of more than just dissatisfaction and suffering for Nietzsche; it can be a sign of strength, "overfullness," and "a craving for beauty... in some deficiency, privation, melancholy, pain... (Nietzsche 21, §SC4)."

What can be said for optimism? The easiest, and perhaps best, analysis that can be given for optimism is to turn pessimism on its head. So, rather than being an attitude associated with providing a negative characterization of existence, optimism is an attitude associated with providing a positive characterization of existence as a result of the positive goods (or lack of negative goods) that accompany existence. These positive goods can range from happiness, pleasure, and enlightenment to meaningful belief, knowledge, and progress. If such a positive characterization of existence were true, then existence would have intrinsic value that makes it better than non-existence- contrary to Schopenhauer's conclusion. However, Schopenhauer's usage of this distinction is set in such a way that optimism, much like pessimism, is a necessary sign of the affirmation of existence and the Will-to-Live. The negative connotations that

Schopenhauer attaches to optimism, better yet, his vehement disparaging of optimism is primarily due to the reality of existence, which is negative, not corresponding to this characterization of existence.

Though Nietzsche might agree with Schopenhauer in disparaging optimism, here again there is a substantial difference between the two that is crucial in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Whereas Schopenhauer has it that optimism is necessarily a sign of affirmation of existence and the Will-to-Live, even though it is fundamentally incorrect in its assessment of the reality of existence, Nietzsche has it that optimism can be a sign of the affirmation of existence and the Will-to-Live, but it can also be a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. In this way, for Nietzsche, optimism can be an attitude that is a sign of the negation of existence and the Will-to-Live. Either type of possible optimism can be found in history, thus the essential properties of optimism, exactly like pessimism, are not fixed nor ahistorical- it is a matter of historical contingency whether pessimism or optimism affirms or negates existence and the Will-to-Live.

3. Tragic Pessimism and Socratic Optimism

Now that there is a working understanding of pessimism and optimism both as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche might have used the terms, it is important to turn to one of the central arguments of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Essentially, Nietzsche's project in the line of argumentation that I will pursue is to show that pessimism and optimism as a distinction about the attitudes one can take towards the characterization of existence does not necessarily indicate anything about a given period of history. These attitudes can indicate any number of conditions about a specific period that conflict with the characterization of existence that is presented. As such, the distinction is ultimately a matter of historical contingency that must be evaluated for each period of history. Further, in this and subsequent works (e.g. *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Will to Power*), an overcoming of this previously facile distinction might be a way of creating a new attitude that is not bound by either one. However, to go into any more detail about this aspect of

Nietzsche's argument is overreaching the bounds of this paper. What is in the bounds of this paper, though, is to show Nietzsche's argument that pessimism is not necessarily a sign of negative leanings in a period of history, nor is optimism necessarily a sign of positive leanings in a period of history. Nietzsche accomplishes this task by examining two aspects of the Greek world: tragic pessimism and Socratic (or Euripidean) optimism. I will try to present Nietzsche's explication of each of these phenomena, and then I will try to show why his argument with regard to Socratic optimism can be further, but better demonstrated elsewhere.

Simply put, as Nietzsche did, one can turn an eye to the Greeks (or any society/culture for that matter) and wonder- why does a society or culture develop a pessimistic attitude? Specifically, why does a society or culture, such as the Greeks, turn to tragedy and tragic myth as a form of art to portray this pessimism? And, not just censored tragic events, the kind of tragedy and tragic myth that deals in armies being slaughtered, fratricide, wives murdering husbands, sons murdering mothers, incest, rape, and torture. It does not seem like any subject was beyond portrayal in these tragedies or tragic myths. Not only were the subjects dark, they were profoundly and predominately pessimistic in their characterizations of existence. For example, the chorus in *Oedipus Colonus* states:

Not to be born conquers all reckoning. But once one has appeared, to go as fast as possible to the place from which one came, is second best by far (Sophocles trans. Blondell 206-7, lines 1224-28).

Commonly referred to as the "wisdom of Silenus," Nietzsche also mentions it in *The Birth of Tragedy* as a pessimistic strain. Essentially, it is the statement that never to have been born is better than to have been born, and if one is born, then it is best to die soon. There is no doubt that this attitude is reflected by Schopenhauer's account of pessimism. Perhaps this ancient sentiment is shocking to the modern sentiment, but, as Nietzsche argues, such tragic spectacles and wisdom were an essential and "typical" part of the Greek art form. Further, it is important to note that entertainment was not the primary reason for attending

such spectacles, otherwise we might not want to view tragedy or tragic myth as anything other than glorified horror spectacles designed to shock and awe. As John Duncan notes:

Athenians were drawn to genuine tragedy not by the prospect of exciting entertainment, but rather by the prospect of a vicarious experience of being overcome by the inevitability of the life-force in a manner that would rekindle the lust for life itself. Life as unbearable- but also the very same life relished (Duncan 66).

This is also an important point because Nietzsche's argument only holds if tragedy and tragic myth is not a manifestation of lamentation or dissatisfaction as a result of the nature of existence. Tragedy or tragic myth must reaffirm existence and the Will-to-Live in order to resemble Nietzsche's understanding of tragic pessimism.

Still, why does Nietzsche think that tragic pessimism is not necessarily an indication of decline and decay? Answering this question is a simple matter that requires a set of assumptions about the historical period of the Greeks under discussion. This set of assumptions revolves around the cultural achievements of the Classical Age of Greece, for the innovations and high period of tragedy corresponded to the Classical Age of Greece coming to full fruition in many other areas as well. In sculpture, Pheidias sculpted cult statues beyond compare for the Temple of Zeus at Olympia and the Parthenon in Athens while Praxiteles sculpted works like the Aphrodite of Knidos. In warfare, the Greeks triumphed over the Persians with the creation of the far superior phalanx formation. In vase-painting, Athenian black- and red-figure painting were reaching an unparalleled sophistication with the work of Andokides, the Amasis Painter, and Exekias. In architecture, the construction of the Parthenon, Theater of Dionysus, the Temple of Hephaistos/Theseion, and other great works were completed. The list of the other great achievements that are concurrent with the great achievements in tragedy is continuous and impressive. Nietzsche claims:

Almost every era and cultural stage has at some point sought in a profoundly ill-tempered frame of mind to free itself of the Greeks, because in comparison with the Greeks, all their own achievements, apparently fully original and admired in all sincerity, suddenly appeared to lose their

color and life and shriveled to unsuccessful copies, in fact, to caricatures (Nietzsche 93, §15).

Thus, it is no wonder that Nietzsche would have thought that the tragic pessimism that accompanied this great period of Greek history was not a pessimism of decline, but, as he puts it, a pessimism of strength. And, following this conclusion, it seems wholly plausible (if not uncontested) to claim that pessimism is not necessarily a sign of decline or decay in a culture or society, but can also be a sign of strength and growth.

However, with tragic pessimism, there was an equal and opposite reaction in Socratic (or Euripidean) optimism. It is a negative reaction, as well. Just as Schopenhauer was disparaging of optimism for its mistaken views of existence and reality, so is Socrates disparaging of tragedy and tragic myth. Nietzsche points out that, “Socrates, as an opponent of tragic art, refrained from attending tragedies” (87, §13). As the tragedies of this period brought a negative characterization of existence, it seems highly likely that Socrates’s opposition to tragic art is a result of his optimism. For, once again, Nietzsche points out that Socrates held:

The unshakeable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it (95, §15).

This attitude that attempts “correcting” being would presumably result for Socrates in some development of existence that ultimately would result in a positive characterization for it. All of this is at the expense of an account of tragic pessimism as an affirmation of existence and the Will-to-Live. For Socrates, the opposite of an affirmation would have to be true because pessimism is necessarily (essentially) a sign of decline and decay just as much as optimism is necessarily a sign of progress and generation. Nietzsche carefully assesses Socrates’s optimism further:

With it Socratism condemns existing art as well as existing ethics. Wherever Socratism turns its searching eyes it sees lack of insight and the power of illusion; and from this lack it infers the essential perversity and

reprehensibility of what exists. Basing himself on this point, Socrates conceives it to be his duty to correct existence: all alone, with an expression of irreverence and superiority, as the precursor of an altogether different culture, art, and morality, he enters a very world, to touch whose very hem would give us the greatest happiness (87, §13).

The same disparaging attitude that Schopenhauer possesses against the optimism seems to come out in this passage from Nietzsche. Crushing the tragic arts down to a triviality and having the attitude that the metaphysical reality of existence can be or is positive is a fundamental mistake to make when it is exactly the opposite. As such, by negating certain aspects of existence, one is in fact turning against existence and the Will-to-Live itself by negating at all, rather than affirming existence and the Will-to-Live in the face of a dissatisfying existence filled with suffering.

Now, though, we arrive at the central question of this paper: how can Socratic optimism be seen as a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts? This question is difficult to answer because it is historical by nature. It is the same as asking what features of Greek culture and society were undergoing a decline while Socratic optimism took hold of Greek culture and society? A number of things might constitute such a decline. For instance, there is the turn away from tragedy as the predominant theater art and the move towards comedy. Largely, there is also a shift from focus on a smaller, aristocratic elite that is greatly capable militarily and socially and artistically refined to a focus on a larger, non-aristocratic majority that is incapable militarily and socially and artistically unrefined. This shift might account for the loss of Greek independence and the joining of its northern neighbor's, the Macedonians, empire as a result of the conquest of Philip II and Alexander III. As for the other art forms of the period, there is also a shift away from the awe-inspiring forms of the Classical Age to those of the Hellenistic, which is left open as to what it might be called- perhaps, repetitive or decadent, at best, as Pliny the Elder wrote. This laundry list of decay and decline in Greek culture and society might be sufficient for some, but I find that it can be better and further demonstrated elsewhere. In particular, Pyrrhonism embodies the pessimism and the

consequences of it that Nietzsche sought to avoid. All the while, Pyrrhonism is also true to Socratic optimism.

4. Pyrrhonism and Socratic Optimism

Undoubtedly, Pyrrhonism is an outgrowth of the Socratic tradition in terms of method. Using the Socratic method, thought, and reason as its tools, Pyrrhonism established its place in the philosophical landscape by turning these tools upon any and all claims to belief or knowledge until belief and knowledge were reduced to suspension of judgment (*epokê*) on all matters. The process of positive, then negative, then positive, then negative response is an infinite process that is supposed to ultimately show a vicious regress of justification. And, since it is taken for granted that infinite regress is bad for any justification, if there is this vicious regress, then nothing can be ultimately justified and we should suspend judgment on all matters. As such, Pyrrhonism leads to a complete and utter cognitive paralysis. Nietzsche would call this process “Socratic dialectic,” but regardless of what it is called, the result is the same: complete and total cognitive paralysis or confusion (*aporia*) with regard to belief or knowledge.

Still, one might try to argue that Pyrrhonism is not directly related to Socratic optimism or the Socratic tradition. However, the means to arguing this claim are limited. Sure, the Stoics did not take Socratic optimism to this far extreme, but how can we account for them not doing so? The methods and tools are the same for both schools of thought, yet it seems that the Stoics did not proceed in the further reasoning that the Pyrrhonians did, which for all extensive purposes seems to be correct in its initial assumptions. These assumptions are simple enough: 1) in order to be justified, all claims must be argued and demonstrated until there is no doubt concerning the claim, 2) an infinite regress of justification shows that there are no sufficient grounds for accepting a given claim, and 3) if a claim is not justified, then we must suspend judgment on the matter. Altogether, the Stoics and other schools that descend from Socrates should not disagree with anyone of these assumptions. In terms of how far the reasoning should extend,

they might disagree. But, is this disagreement truly justified if one is attempting to justify a claim that one has not investigated fully or responded to all of the objections concerning it? The answer seems to be negative, otherwise the cut off for how much justification one needs for a claim is arbitrary. In this sense, Pyrrhonism is a school of thought that descends from Socrates and is truest to Socrates's thought because it carries the Socratic method to its fullest conclusion. It is no coincidence that Socrates himself claimed that he knew that he knew nothing. Then again, Pyrrhonism might have been even more true to the Socratic method because it claimed that Socrates should have suspended judgment even for this claim. Overall, any demonstration of the claim that Pyrrhonism is not directly related to the Socratic method or Socratic optimism, ultimately, cannot displace the fundamental relation that Pyrrhonism and the Socratic method have to one another.

So, Pyrrhonism is directly related to Socratic optimism. The previous section's demonstration of how one could see that Socratic optimism was an indication of these negative conditions were loose at best. One could easily make the argument that those points were merely circumstantial rather than directly related. But, on the basis of Pyrrhonism being a direct consequence of Socratic optimism, we will be able to show that Socratic optimism is an indication of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts as Nietzsche believed it to be. How is this the case?

Returning to Schopenhauer, there is an important series of points to make in order to show that Pyrrhonism- as directly related to Socratic optimism- is an indication of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. The first point is that genuine pessimism for Schopenhauer is necessarily an indication of the previous sentence's negative conditions (though Nietzsche disagrees). The second point is that Schopenhauer prescribes as an antidote for pessimism the adoption of a form of asceticism, denial of the Will-to-Live, or nihilism. For any option, one must come to be in a state or attitude of suspension, resignation, and a lack of will. Or, in other words, one must come to deny the strivings of the Will towards the many ends of our arbitrary and basic desires that delude it. These ends can include anything from the accrual of knowledge, the possession of transcendence in art, the satisfaction of bodily desires, moral

achievement, and so on. Thus, having ceased the Will's striving, the Will arrives at composure or tranquility because it no longer strives and fails with the results of dissatisfaction and suffering. The third point is that the prescribed antidote for pessimism is similar, if not the same, as the state of *ataraxia* that the Pyrrhonian skeptic must adopt in response to *epokê*. To remind, *ataraxia* is a state of tranquility or freedom from distress about the nature of the world as a result of *epokê*. With this equivalence, there is a close tie between the genuine pessimism presented by Schopenhauer and Pyrrhonism, which is a direct consequence of the Socratic optimism described by Nietzsche. To demonstrate and clarify, if someone tells you that they are taking a medication that you know will help sinus problems, then, presumably, it is reasonable to claim that this someone has sinus problems. In much the same way, if someone adopts an attitude that is in all respects similar to an antidote to pessimism, then, presumably, it is also reasonable to claim that the conditions of pessimism hold in order for that antidote to be needed. Thus, Pyrrhonism is an indication that genuine pessimism holds, and genuine pessimism is an indication of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. By extension, if Pyrrhonism is a direct consequence of Socratic optimism, then Socratic optimism is an indication of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. If this argument is correct, then qualitatively there is no difference between the genuine pessimism of Schopenhauer and Socratic optimism with regard to what they indicate. Further, and most importantly, Nietzsche is correct in *The Birth of Tragedy* to think that Socratic optimism is a sign (or indication) of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. And, as a matter of entailment, if Socratic optimism is a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts, then optimism (in general) can be a sign of these negative conditions.

Another question lingers: would Nietzsche agree that Pyrrhonism is a means to showing the conclusion he argued? I think so, even though Nietzsche does not state anything explicit. What he does state, though, are a number of points about Pyrrho in *The Will To Power* that give the impression that he would agree. Let us take for granted the negative conditions of genuine pessimism and Socratic optimism—decline, decay, degeneration, weary, weak instincts, and nihilism. One of the first mentions by Nietzsche

of Pyrrho in *The Will to Power* is as follows: “ I see only one original figure in those [philosophers after Socrates] that came after: a late arrival but necessarily the last- the nihilist Pyrrho” (*The Will to Power* 240-1, §437). There are also these remarks from Nietzsche about Pyrrho:

Sagacious weariness: Pyrrho.... Simple: indescribably patient, carefree, mild.... A Buddhist for Greece;... the unbelief of weariness in the importance of all things.... To overcome contradiction; no contest; no will to distinction; to deny the Greek instincts.... Pyrrho more travelled, experienced, nihilistic... (241, §437).

Similarly, Nietzsche poses and answers a question concerning Pyrrho: “ What inspires the skeptic? *Hatred* for the dogmatist- or a need for rest, weariness, as in the case of Pyrrho” (249, § 455). In each of these quotations, Nietzsche puts forward descriptions of Pyrrho that overwhelmingly indicate an agreement with the conclusion that Pyrrhonism is closely related to the negative conditions that I have repeatedly listed. Nietzsche notes that Pyrrho is a nihilist, weary, has no will to distinction (moreover it seems Pyrrho has no will to anything), is a denier of Greek instincts, and is motivated by what seems to be *ressentiment*, or begrudging onto another one’s failures or pain, in his opposition to the dogmatists. Each of these descriptions is directly related to the negative conditions indicated by Socratic optimism. For instance, “sagacious weariness” is related to the negative condition of weariness for Socratic optimism. Rather than acting as a gadfly, Socrates’s tradition has resulted in Pyrrhonism amongst other things. In addition, the description of Pyrrho as a nihilist is fitting for one who negates existence and the Will-to-Live. Overall, the comparisons could continue, but I will let these points stand on their own as I think they are sufficient to claim that Nietzsche would agree with the arguments and conclusions in this paper.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that Pyrrhonism, in virtue of being a descendant of the Socratic tradition and sharing all the base assumptions of Socratic thought, is a direct consequence of

Socratic optimism. I then attempted to show that if this is the case, then due to the similarities between the genuine pessimism presented by Schopenhauer and Pyrrhonism, it follows that Pyrrhonism is an indication of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. And, by extension, I claimed that Socratic optimism, because Pyrrhonism is a direct consequence of it, is also an indication of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. As far as Nietzsche's argument goes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, this conclusion is welcome. It was one of Nietzsche's central projects to show that optimism could be a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. And, with a demonstration that Socratic optimism shows these signs accomplished, it follows necessarily that optimism can be a sign of these negative conditions. However, it is important not forget the other side of his argument- pessimism is not necessarily a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary, and weak instincts. And, of course, this conclusion is shown through tragic pessimism. With both of these points in conjunction, there is a breakdown in the distinction between pessimism and optimism. As Nietzsche saw it, this distinction was tenuous at best and utterly wrong at worst. Either way, Nietzsche thought that it was more than plausible that each of these terms could be associated with either affirmative or negative value judgments with regard to existence or the Will-to-Live. As such, it is more than possible that what looks like pessimism or optimism could actually indicate the opposite. But, do not take my word for it- take Nietzsche's word in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

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'Faced with The Satyr'³

Nietzsche's Tragic Knowledge of Nature

Luke Trusso

Abstract: Like all great books, *The Birth of Tragedy* is many things-different things to different readers: an amateur investigation into certain literary, aesthetic, and psychological trajectories in ancient Greek culture, Nietzsche's first book, historical revisionism, a rough sketch of his future projects, philosophical fantasy, dubious scholarship (I am thinking here of Ulrich von Willamowitz-Moellendorff's infamous rejection of the BT) and possibly an embarrassment to its writer. In the essay *An Attempt at Self-Criticism* that prefaces the 1886 edition, I find Nietzsche's self-deprecating 'criticisms' above to be rhetorical and philosophical virtues rather than histrionic imperfections, but that is an argument for another day. The title of my paper is taken from section 8 of the BT where Nietzsche engages in a lengthy discussion of the role of the satyr, or goat song, in Greek culture. Following his brief, but superb and often quoted analysis of *Hamlet*. Nietzsche writes: "Faced with the satyr, cultured man shriveled to a mendacious caricature" (41) and later in the same section: "The idyllic shepherd of modern man is merely a counterfeit of the sum of educated illusions which modern man takes to be nature; the Dionysian Greek wants truth and nature at full strength" (43).

"...a lie is told which causes pain to disappear from the features of nature" - Nietzsche (BT 80)

"We shall never comprehend the supreme value of tragedy until like the Greeks,
we experience it as the essence of all prophylactic healing energies..." - Nietzsche (BT 99)

At the beginning of Pasolini's 1969 film *Medea* - after a centaur has instructed Jason, son of Aeson in agriculture and philosophy, we witness a Dionysian sacrifice both exhilarating and terrifying. A young Colchian boy is lead (possibly drugged) to a primitive crucifix of bleached, loosely girdled driftwood atop a hill where he is choked to death and his body hacked into pieces with a stone ax. His organs and entrails are distributed to eager peasants by a shaman/animistic priest who then blesses their spring harvest by rubbing bloody chunks of liver, heart, and lung on sun scorched wheat shoot and olive branches. This scene is photographed ceremoniously with a combination of long tracking shots and quick cuts absent any dialogue or narration. We watch the grotesque ritual while a haunting score of North African tribal screams, chants and crude, tortured string instruments scratch our ears.

The film is a relic of counterculture surrealism - something a freshman film student might be instructed to write a term paper on in 1960's Italian Cinema 101. That said the film rehearses and performs many of the key arguments in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* with an eerie, almost uncanny precision. Pasolini offers his audience a revisionist, adumbrated adaptation of Euripides' play. His primary sources are the original Greek myths of Jason and Medea and the darker recesses of his own imagination. He exchanges most of the dialogue of the original play for images both grisly and elegantly Arcadian, but the presentation is arguably Dionysian. The centaur and apparent stepfather to Jason instructs the boy in the ways of the seed and of the necessity of myth in human life. He teaches about the evolution of primordial nature and ultimately, reveals to him the tragic wisdom that there are no gods. Jason sits silent under a mop of russet curls in a dirty loincloth with a vapid grimace plastered across his face. As years pass and the centaur trades his horse's ass for legs and transforms into man, Jason's chin whiskers grow into a bushy, glamorous mess. Armed with the newfound knowledge that the gods live only in myth, Jason-the-man-child can now begin his legendary *bildungsroman* quest for the Golden Fleece; a journey that may have dislodged Dionysian wisdom from Western civilization forever.

The grand irony of Pasolini's surreal, dreamlike vision of *Medea* is that in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche abhorred Euripides whom he referred to as "...the poet of aesthetic Socratism" (64). Nietzsche saw Euripides as the mortal enemy of Aeschylus because under the spell of Socratic wisdom, he tipped the scales in the balance between Apollonian and Dionysian forces in favor of Apollo. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Euripides is cast as the dramatic manifestation of the Socratic man of dialectic and reason: the playwright as both instrument and purveyor of scientific knowledge. Jason's abduction of Medea from her tribal community thrusts her into a world of work and reason in the Greek polis of Corinth. In Pasolini's version, it is tempting to say that Jason represents what Nietzsche perceived as the: "...contrast between this genuine truth of nature and the cultural lie which pretends to be the only reality..." (41). By kidnapping the barbarian queen, forcing her to become a proper member of civilization and conferring upon her the duties of a good Greek wife, Medea must abandon the brutal, imaginary justice of her primitive culture that is steeped in myth, magic and Dionysian ecstasies. What was tragic for Euripides and his audience is the drama of domestic violence: the infanticide of Mermeros and Pheres, Medea's children with Jason. What is tragic from a Nietzschean perspective – and incidentally marks the core of my argument - is the very loss of tragic knowledge itself, along with our preternatural relationship to nature. When Medea escapes dramatically on her chariot of dragons via Euripides' contrived *deus ex machina* at the end of the play, it may signal our yearning to flee from the polis back to a primordial nature that no longer exists. Or as Nietzsche writes, perhaps more poetically: "It hardly seems possible to transplant a foreign myth to a new place with lasting success without doing irreparable damage to the tree in the process" (111).

Like all great books, *The Birth of Tragedy* is many things-different things to different readers: an amateur investigation into certain literary, aesthetic, and psychological trajectories in ancient Greek culture, Nietzsche's first book, historical revisionism, a rough sketch of his future projects, philosophical fantasy, dubious scholarship (I am thinking here of Ulrich von Willamowitz-Moellendorff's infamous

rejection of the BT) and possibly an embarrassment to its writer. In the essay *An Attempt at Self-Criticism* that prefaces the 1886 edition, Nietzsche writes:

“I declare that it is badly written, clumsy, embarrassing with a rage for imagery and confused in its imagery, emotional, here and there sugary to the point of effeminacy, uneven in its pace, lacking the will to logical cleanliness,...mistrustful even of the *propriety* of proving things,... ‘music’ for those who were baptized in the name of music,...(5-6).

I find Nietzsche’s self-deprecating ‘criticisms’ above to be rhetorical and philosophical virtues rather than histrionic imperfections, but that is an argument for another day. The title of my paper is taken from section 8 of the BT where Nietzsche engages in a lengthy discussion of the role of the satyr, or goat song, in Greek culture. Following his brief, but superb and often quoted analysis of *Hamlet*. Nietzsche writes: “Faced with the satyr, cultured man shriveled to a mendacious caricature” (41) and later in the same section: “The idyllic shepherd of modern man is merely a counterfeit of the sum of educated illusions which modern man takes to be nature; the Dionysian Greek wants truth and nature at full strength” (43).

For Nietzsche, the satyr as mythological creature –not as a genre of Greek drama in this particular context- represents the Dionysian unity of nature, opposed to the principle of individuation of the Apollonian image-maker. (The Apollonian is signified by the plastic arts: sculpture, painting, etc. whereas the Dionysian is characterized by or expressed in music, dance and tragic drama). In Nietzsche’s concept of the satyr I find the possibility, or see the potential for a heroic symbol to resist the complete domination of rational thought and our obsessive technocratic practices that may have led us to environmental ruin. In other words my thesis is that critically reexamining Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* may provide

environmental philosophy with a fresh, innovative way to rethink our looming ecological crises, and in the process define our current Anthropocene.⁴

As far as the ‘tragic knowledge of nature’ is concerned, it is unclear what Nietzsche means precisely when he uses the word nature, which appears dozens of times in the text. We may assume it is an odd mixture of Aristotle’s common definition of nature from his *Physics* as “the inner principle of change and being at rest or in motion.” In other places he may be invoking Spinoza’s *Natura Naturans* (nature naturing) and *Natura Naturata* (nature natured), or he could be referring to the poetic concept of *Phusis* from the *Orphic Hymn 10 to Phusis*. We know that Nietzsche clearly admired Emerson, so he may have his seminal essay *Nature* in mind where Emerson refers to nature as “...all that is not me...” One could justifiably assume the various conceptions of nature from German Romanticism, which undoubtedly influenced Nietzsche’s understanding of the word as well, specifically in his lamentation for Schiller’s lingering sentimentality in section 19 of *The Birth of Tragedy*. And of course, Schopenhauer’s philosophy of aesthetic pessimism is at the core of Nietzsche’s definition of nature. What we may glean explicitly in Nietzsche’s text is that with rise of Socrates’ philosophy in the form of the dialectic, the importance of tragic or Dionysian wisdom dissipated, became more and more marginalized and thus transformed Greek (and by extension our) relationship to the natural world. Nature may or may not have intrinsic value independently of human interests, but nature does not suffer, humans do. It is precisely tragic knowledge in the form of the musical arts – specifically Wagnerian opera for Nietzsche - that may help to rehabilitate and contribute to arguments in environmental philosophy and thereby help to alleviate our suffering.

But why, one may ask, does environmental philosophy (or humanity’s place in nature for that matter) even need rehabilitation? Maybe Martin Drenthen posed the question more eloquently in his

⁴ Relating to or denoting the current geological epoch/age -from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards - viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. It is a term first used in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, who shared a Nobel Prize for his work on the chemical mechanisms that affect the ozone layer.

essay, *Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration*, when he asked: “How can environmental philosophy benefit from Friedrich Nietzsche’s radical critique of morality?” (1). It is an extraordinarily vital and, I would argue, overlooked question that could furnish eco-philosophy with some heavy rhetorical ordnance. This paper does not seek to reread the quite expansive field of environmental philosophy via the lens of Nietzsche’s entire corpus, much less offer a comprehensive engagement with his complex critique of morality. Nor is this paper a discussion of environmental ethics in the conventional sense. But, because I have not encountered any explicit treatment of the BT as a catalyst for environmentalism in any of my research, I am treading somewhat fresh waters. Thus my investigation must be relatively hermeneutic in its interpretive framework. What I am proposing, though not unequivocally, is that Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* is vastly underestimated book – many of its core theses unmined –and may be indeed read as a vigorous proto-environmental treatise. If I am working in any specific tradition, it is the possibly dangerous intersection between environmental aesthetics and a peculiar brand of environmental nihilism or pessimism. I also understand that to do so exclusively would be tragic. Thus where Nietzsche’s investigation into the origins of ancient Greek tragic knowledge is epistemological and philological, I am playing more loosely with the concept. For the purposes of my argument, I would maintain that we have broken completely with our ability to understand nature tragically and thus broken with our capacity to confront potential extinction crises on our planet; crises that could signal our own annihilation.

Instead of a healthy admixture of Dionysus and Apollo, we now live in a purely Apollonian world of plastic images whether they take the traditional Greek form of paintings, sculpture or in twenty first century terms, the digital interface of smart phones, tablets and other personal electronic devices. Cooing over our technological achievements, we stare incessantly at blinking screens while the ‘natural world’ contorts and hurls (what we perceive) as natural disasters at us. While we are taking selfies of our latest hairstyles, the polar ice caps are receding. We then offer up the now customary thumbs up/thumbs down

– liking or disliking what we see or read on social networks. We fancy ourselves expert curators of images, sounds and words passing aesthetic judgment on whatever flashes across the screen, whether it takes the form of political blogging, posting photos of our dog on Instagram, or making playlists of songs that accompany our every mood throughout the day. The problem is that without any objective criteria upon which to base those judgments or further teleological necessity to justify our lifestyle obsessions, we are just fools clicking away in cyberspace. The Kant of the third critique must be crying. Maybe Nietzsche is laughing. We are so removed from our own deaths via our mediated experience of the material/natural world that we cannot even begin to live and dance again. If there is anything to be gleaned from *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is that the division of the cosmos into man and nature is an arbitrary gesture for which we have Aristotle to thank. The human being's experience of Dionysian ecstasy is merely one way in which nature expresses herself.

I am not advocating, rejecting or supplanting the arguments made by environmental ethicists. I am thinking here of the usual detours through deontology and utilitarianism; care ethics and virtue ethics. (Peter Singer, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Thoreau, etc.) What I am suggesting is that *The Birth of Tragedy* may assist, bolster and simultaneously offer constructive criticism to those arguments. My purpose is to demonstrate that the BT may have something important to add to ongoing conversations in environmental philosophy, environmental science, Nietzsche scholarship and eco-literacy. After countless readings, I embrace fully its mytho-poetic overtones and find myself submitting to its Dionysian wisdom, whether or not it is historically accurate. The text is what literary critic Harold Bloom – who deemed Nietzsche “the prophet of the antithetical” – would deem imaginative literature. In a sense I want to do *The Birth of Tragedy* literary and philosophical justice. It may on some level be a work of philosophical fantasy, but therein rests its power. And if, as Nietzsche proclaims, it is true that “art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life” then *The Birth of Tragedy* is a work of

philosophical art in its own right, as well as an underappreciated essay of immense cognitive strength. The more I confront and reread it, the more I see its potential to confront environmental problems.

Nietzsche writes in section 23 of *The Birth of Tragedy* that "...Greek tragedy delayed the destruction of myth"(110). Is our own elegant repackaging of the latest incarnation of the green movement just another form of commodity fetishism temporarily delaying our own destruction? For Nietzsche, art is an illusion in its Apollonian form and because we find this imagistic illusion to be more seductive than the appeal of the natural environment, we all too often neglect or turn away from nature viewing her as merely an instrument to serve what Herbert Marcuse perceived as the false needs of the market and modern culture. According to Nietzsche, traditional 'Socratic' wisdom undermines aesthetic experience by using the logical contrivances of scientific knowledge to tame or pacify our instincts instead of using them constructively. In this sense, the BOT is a sort of literary precursor to Freud's *Civilizations and Its Discontents*. Maybe with a little shove from Nietzsche towards a resuscitation of Dionysian-Tragic knowledge, we could find the courage to turn off our iPods and listen again to the tragic choruses of nature. Tragic language, tragic thoughts and making room for environmental tragedy in our everyday lives not only occupies a place in environmental philosophy, but may lend to the sustainability of future discussions in eco-philosophy.⁵

The BT rehearses many of the problems facing contemporary environmentalism such as conservation, sustainability, energy concerns and mental ecology. Perhaps most importantly and most relevant to this paper, I am arguing that Nietzsche's discussion of the tension between what he identifies as Apollonian and Dionysian forces⁶ anticipates the imaginary separation between man and nature, thereby marking an original exchange of tragic knowledge in favor of Socratic wisdom. This tension was

⁵ By 'tragic' I mean Nietzsche's various definitions of the word employed through the BOT.

⁶ In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche sometimes refers to Apollo and Dionysus as 'art deities', 'drives' (Triebe) or 'art-worlds of *dreams* and *intoxication*' respectively depending on the translation. I will use the different monikers interchangeably throughout the dissertation.

re-enacted or performed in the dramatic competition between Aeschylus and Euripides— or the metaphorical contest between Socrates and Dionysus for the souls of the Greek people. For Nietzsche, when Euripides supplants Sophocles as the new champion of drama, he turns his back on elements of our Dionysian instincts, and thereby signals the triumph of scientific knowledge in Western culture from which we are still reeling today. Nietzsche argues that we have tragically lost our capacity for what he calls “aesthetic listening” along with a diminished appetite for Dionysian intoxication. He writes in section 22:

“Thus along with the rebirth of tragedy, the aesthetic listener too is reborn” (106).

First and foremost, I do not want to reduce Nietzsche’s definitions of the Apollonian and Dionysian to the superficial opposition between nature and culture or a cartoonish country mouse vs. the city mouse scenario as much environmental philosophy is accused of doing. Though tempting, I would also like to make it clear that I am not favoring the Dionysian over the Apollonian and neither does Nietzsche. Both are equally crucial to Nietzsche’s understanding of Greek subject formation and the cultural heritage of Western civilization. The problem for Nietzsche is that the Apollonian – in the form of Socratic/Euripidean forces – has completely overshadowed Dionysian or tragic knowledge. The moment Hellenic poetry was eclipsed by philosophy marked an irrevocable change in the course of Western culture. Again, in section 23 he writes: “...beneath this restlessly agitated cultural life and senseless education there lies hidden a magnificent, inwardly healthy, ancient strength” (109).

This legacy of an “agitated cultural life” has continued to define our relationship to the natural world for the last two thousand millennia. One might liken the Apollo/Dionysus distinction as I am reading it, to the difference between Deep Ecology and Shallow Ecology.⁷ Again, according to Nietzsche, the

⁷ Peter Singer offers a succinct explanation of what is a complex environmental theory in the second edition of his *Practical Ethics*: “The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess wrote a brief but influential article distinguishing between ‘shallow’ and ‘deep’ strands in the ecological movement. Shallow ecological thinking was limited to the traditional moral framework; those who thought in this way were anxious to avoid pollution to our water supply so that we could have safe water to drink, and they sought to preserve wilderness so that people could continue to enjoy

duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian are aesthetic creations and reinforce the necessity of art in both mythmaking and metaphysics. Both drives also act as a buffer between humans and the metaphysical horrors of life's inevitable meaninglessness. Couched in these terms, it would not be outlandish to classify my project as a form of philosophical art therapy whereby pessimistic, tragic knowledge has the potential to rehabilitate the natural world through licking the wounds logical, 'optimistic' reason has inflicted upon her. In section 15 of the BT, Nietzsche triumphantly announces the return of Dionysus whose curative powers are offered up in the form of an aesthetic tonic: "a noble and gifted man...sees how logic curls up around itself at these limits and finally bites its own tail, then a new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic knowledge*, which simply to be endured, needs art for protection and as medicine" (75).

This a sentiment perhaps better expressed by Russian composer Igor Stravinsky who claimed: "To be deprived of art and left alone with philosophy is to be close to hell." Such a sentiment, while combative, is not meant to be anti-philosophical, but merely a reminder that a healthy philosophical diet is nourished by both art and myth just as much as rational thought. One could easily make or envision a counter argument against Nietzsche and my project and claim that the Socratic position is better suited to environmental studies. It might read something like: If we were all virtuous knowledge seekers who subscribe to the virtuous life as advanced countless times by Socrates and Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, then we might not be in the mess we are in today. I can just hear the ancient scholars yelling, "I told you so!" If we had not been so seduced by the world of material appearances, guided by our lust for things, directed by our greed, and controlled by and slaves to our desires/appetites/passions; if we were more committed to eudemonism then maybe we could avoid ecological catastrophe. Dialectic may be greener than tragic wisdom and the Socratic way may be more sustainable thus leaving a smaller carbon

walking through it. Deep ecologists, on the other hand, wanted to preserve the integrity of the biosphere for its own sake, irrespective of the possible benefits to humans that might flow from so doing" (280).

footprint. Besides, if we conquer the fear of death like Socrates, then who cares if the species goes extinct. But Nietzsche's argument is that we have already trodden that path – already applied the dialectic to all areas of social and political life and it resulted in what he perceived as the prosaic mono-culture of late nineteenth century Europe.

Samuel Beckett said: "Dance first, think later. That is the natural order of things." Tragic wisdom indeed... Nietzsche's treatment of the Dionysian and the Apollonian duality at the core of *The Birth of Tragedy* may provide some psychological insight into his idealization of Greek tragic culture, whose strength he so admired because he himself was physically weak and emotionally distressed by the contingencies of his own life. Accompanied by Wagner's music and the elegiac wails of the Chorus, he found in the romantic trope of the Homeric warrior-poets in Greek tragedy, necessary armaments to begin his insurgency against Western values, which would reverberate throughout all his writings.

We look around in vain for just one root bearing vigorous branches, for a single patch of fertile and healthy soil; wherever we look, we see only dust, sand, petrification, things dying from thirst.... But how suddenly the wilderness of our tired culture, which we have just painted in such gloomy colours, can be transformed, when it is touched by Dionysiac magic! (BT 97-98).

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Nietzsche and Cult Practices in Greek Tragedy

Yunus Tuncel

Abstract: Greek drama and its house, theater, is a specific and unique crystalization of many forces of culture that started coming together in the 6th century B.C. in ancient Greece; geographically they came from different parts of Greek lands but they seem to have coalesced in Athens. Among these forces we can count epic poetry, lyric poetry (especially choral poetry like the dithyramb), and cult practices, which were already interwoven in one form or another in earlier times. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche presents how these forces came together with an emphasis on the cult of Dionysus. In this paper, I would like to explore his thesis as I explore the presence of Dionysian rituals in tragedy, but take it further and examine, based on specific tragedies, the presence of rituals of other cults such as those of Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Hades, Hermes, and Prometheus. Although Nietzsche's thesis that Greek theater evolved out of the cult of Dionysus may be correct, it is not sound to say that all gods were presented on stage through the mask of Dionysus. I will end my paper by reflecting on the difficulties of presenting gods on stage, which forced dramatists to invent devices like the 'deus-ex-machina.'

Ancient Greek tragedy is an aesthetic phenomenon that emerged in 6th century B.C. as a result of the conflux of many different forces of culture, including those of religion, poetry, and politics. This paper will focus on the relation between tragedy and religion in ancient Greece and precisely the presence of cult rituals and practices in tragedy. Cult practices in ancient Greece were pervasive and present in all aspects of life. As in many other ancient societies, these rituals were, among many others, those of sacrifice, or offerings of any kind, fertility rites, orgiastic rites, athletic practices, and divination and prophecy. Nietzsche's conclusion regarding the origin of tragedy in the cult of Dionysus has been confirmed by many other scholars of the 20th century. Nietzsche's point makes sense not only because the core of Greek drama, the chorus, may have originated from the practices of Dionysian revelers, but also because acting is specifically an ecstatic function. However, it is not only the rituals of Dionysus that are present in Greek drama, but also the rituals of many other Greek cults.

By presence, I do not mean direct presence, as these rituals are exercised within the cult domain, but rather rituals in their crystalized forms. The fact that other cult practices, other than those of Dionysus, are present in Greek drama does not disprove Nietzsche's thesis, but calls for a repositioning of how we view ancient Greek cults and their relations. What follows below is a survey of the presence of different cult practices in tragedy other than those of Dionysus; for the latter Nietzsche gives ample evidence in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Out of the extant seven tragedies by Aeschylus plus seven by Sophocles and nineteen by Euripides, we arrive at a total of thirty-six tragedies. Based on a survey of these tragedies, I developed the following method to pursue this project: 1) tragedies where a god is the hero of the drama (as in *Prometheus Bound*); 2) tragedies where a cult function repeats in different dramas, sometimes in more than one tragedian (for instance, the seer); and finally 3) specific cult rituals that are present as part of the development and the resolution of the drama. It cannot be within the scope of this short presentation to explore every single cult practice in the thirty-six extant Greek tragedies; therefore, this is a cross-section of a bigger study.

I. Cults and Tragedy

1. Gods as Tragic Heroes

Prometheus Bound by Aeschylus gives us an example of a god, though Titanic, as a tragic hero. Prometheus, as the bringer of fire to humanity at a cost to himself, symbolizes 'philanthropy', enlightenment, and suffering and also holds the secret knowledge of the future, an earlier form of cult of prophecy in ancient Greece. Although there is less evidence and knowledge about the earlier Titanic gods and cults, we can assume, based on this tragedy, that the cult of Prometheus included rituals of prophecy that helped humans with their dilemmas and opened up new paths for them. "Verily the day shall yet come when...the Prince of the Blessed shall have need of me to reveal the new design..." (lines 168-170) He even forewarned the Titans that they would be overthrown by younger gods, but no one paid heed to his advice, and, as a result, Prometheus and

his mother Themis, joined the new gods, and the Titans were overthrown as he prophesized (lines 205-230). Some of the rituals of Prometheus are revealed in the text, albeit not with any specific details: Prometheus found cures for maladies, marked ways for humans to read the future (taught them prophecy), showed how to interpret dreams, animal signs, and flame signs, and taught them the art of metallurgy, how to use bronze, iron, silver and gold (lines 480-505).

2. Common Cult Functions

One cult function that appears in many tragedies is prophecy, which often appears in the character of the seer. Blindness of the seer underlies his introspection. This is specifically a function of the cult of Apollo. Thanks to Herodotus and other Greek writers, we have more information about this cult's rituals than those of Prometheus. We find the crystallization of this oracular ritual in characters like Cassandra and Teiresias. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* Cassandra, a priestess of Apollo brought from Troy, foresees the doom ahead of her and Agammemnon at the palace of Argos.

Cassandra: There is no escape; no, my friends, there is none any more.

...

Cassandra: The day is come; flight would profit me but little.

...

Cassandra: The house reeks with blood-dripping slaughter. (lines 1300-1310)

In the second sequel to the *Agamemnon* trilogy, *The Libation-Bearers*, Pylades invokes Apollo and counsels Orestes to follow the oracle, as he says: "What then becomes henceforth of Loxias' oracles,

declared at Pytho...?” (line 900) The invocation is carried on in the third sequel, *Eumenides*, where the priestess of Apollo opens the drama followed by Apollo himself. Here Apollo is present to confirm the fulfillment of his own prophecy and will help Orestes in his plight of being haunted by the ghost of Clytaemestra and pursued by the Eumenides, those avengers of matricide. However, the tragic conflict between Orestes/Apollo and Clytaemestra/Eumenides will not be solved at the level of prophecy and mother-right seeking. Another intervention will be needed, which I will visit later.

Oracular rituals of Apollo are present in other tragedies as well, most notably in Sophocles’ *King Oedipus*. Here Tiresias, the blind seer of Apollo, who speaks in riddles, is the holder of all truth, the mystery of which lies in the rituals of the Pythian. The chorus reveals this oracular mystery of Apollo:

Chorus:

Who—

who is the man the voice of god denounces

Resounding out of the rocky gorge of Delphi?

The horror too dark to tell,

Whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work?

His time has come to fly...

But he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi

Ringing out of the heart of Earth,

the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom

the doom that never dies, the terror—

The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror! (lines 530-555)

These lines and many other passages of this trilogy reveal much about the oracular rituals that were practiced at the cult of Apollo. All of these rituals of Apollo's cult that permeate Greek tragedy cannot be confined to what Nietzsche calls 'Apollinian' inspired by Apollo's name. Nietzsche used the term 'Apollinian' to designate the principle of individuation and all that relates to it such as the image, dream, etc. The rituals of Apollo like those of divination exceed the limits of what Nietzsche calls 'Apollinian.' For instance, one must be in ecstasy, a Dionysian function, to be able to divine, and hence these demarcations among different cult functions are highly tenuous.

3. Specific Cult Rituals

Athena and the council of wisdom. In the conflict between Orestes who kills his mother to avenge his father and the Furies who go after matricides, as portrayed by Aeschylus in the *Eumenides*, Athena interferes as she creates a proto-typical court to mediate the conflict. She calls for moderation on both sides and soothes the raging Furies. Orestes, who is supported by Apollo, is saved, though transformed through the ordeal of being pursued by the blood-seeking Titanic goddesses. What we see in this drama are the vestiges of the cult of Athena and its exercise and "distribution" of justice. Here Athena is the judge and she executes justice with her wisdom. We can say that this dramatic court somehow reflects the justice system in Athens in 5th century B.C., both of which can be traced to the cult practices of Athena, the overseeing goddess of Athens.

There are many other rituals of specific cults that are present in Greek tragedy such as burial rituals that appear in *Antigone*, *Ajax*, and *Suppliants*. Many cults were tightly sealed and their rituals could not be known outside the cult domains. Demeter's was such a cult and Aeschylus was chased and threatened with death for revealing the secrets of her rituals. This drama of Aeschylus where he presumably revealed

Eleusian mysteries did not survive. In dramas that deal with Hercules such as *The Madness of Hercules* and *The Children of Hercules* by Euripides, we find rituals of Zeus and Hera. The list is long and would have been longer if we had more extant tragedies.

II. Nietzsche and Dionysus

Nietzsche had knowledge of many of the Greek cults and gods and had even given a lecture on Greek religion at Basel University, which he called *Der griechische Gottesdienst*. However, Nietzsche, in BT, considers other gods, heroes and cult functions as different dimensions and masks of Dionysus. "...all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage—Prometheus, Oedipus, etc.—are mere masks of this original hero, Dionysus. That behind all these masks there is a deity, that is one essential reason for the typical "ideality" of these famous figures which has caused so much astonishment..." (73) Here a question arises: why would different gods be present on stage through the masks of Dionysus, especially when we keep in mind that Dionysus was a recent comer into the Greek pantheon and was not liked by all gods? Either Nietzsche is wrong about the origin of Greek theater, despite the evidence, or, if he is right, there must be another explanation. At the outset I see two possible explanations, both of which need to be researched: the first one is the role of hosting. If theater belongs to the cult of Dionysus, then Dionysus becomes the hosting god, as he hosts other gods and their cults. Hosting does not erase the hostility among gods; therefore, this can be a plausible explanation. In other words, we can host those to whom we are hostile. The second explanation has to do with the chiasmatic union of all gods and cults in ancient Greek religion, which may be the case for all archaic religions. Owing to our rational heritage, we categorize things, through which we establish fixed boundaries, where boundaries may be fluid and changing and where disparate beings may be interwoven with one another. Ancient Greek cults may have been more inter-penetrative than we understand. If this is the case, Nietzsche's thesis must be revisited and presented in a different light.

It is interesting to note that in the aforementioned lecture on Greek religion, Nietzsche not only does not privilege the cult of Dionysus but also sees dramatic dimension in all cults:

Almost all cults contain a drama, ‘δράμα-drama,’ a piece of the represented myth, which was based on the foundation of the cult. Its proper sense appears: it is the highest sign of devotion, to do and to suffer what a god himself has done and has suffered; shortly, so far as it is possible to trouble oneself to be him or his follower. This is worth as the means to move the god, to take part with him and to appear. At the festivals of Dionysus on Mount Parnas, one always believed that the god was always there, would be audible in Bacchic cries and cymbal sounds. One assumes this: when one creates same conditions, the same thing steps in; also the epiphany of a god that is always linked to blessing. It is a kind of pressure. One believed moderately to see a god, it was worth for nothing so difficult to move him to come. Not only by doing the same, but also insofar as one does the similar, one feels oneself near him. One thinks about the situation of women in the cult of Demeter; the bud that is planted in the bosom of the earth in order to bring forth fruits was an analog of sexual procreation. All women felt themselves similar to the mother earth and served her.⁸

As seen in this part of the lecture, Nietzsche gives examples from different cults to explain cult rituals. It is the genius of Greek polytheism, which sustained different human attributes and functions in their conflicting diversity. Nietzsche was well aware of this aspect of Greek religion and acknowledges it throughout his works, including in this lecture. Here is the opening sentence of the lecture: “There has never been such a worship like that of the Greeks: in beauty, splendor, multiplicity, and cohesion it is unique in the world and one of the highest creations of their spirit.”⁹ There is no privileging of the cult of Dionysus in this lecture, which had only a few students. Can we then attribute the privileging of Dionysus to a rhetorical device on Nietzsche’s part, a device that lasts all throughout Nietzsche’s life as a thinker from his first book to his last? The goal of this rhetoric would be: the ecstatic practices and functions of Dionysus have fallen into oblivion and must be re-vitalized. I am in agreement with the goal of this rhetoric, but have

⁸ *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Berlin: DeGruyter, 1983, Volume II-5, p.374. (translation is mine)

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

to warn Nietzsche's readers that the privileging of one cult or god over others, where such privileging has no basis, is the beginning of monotheism. Nietzsche had much to say on this subject, often critical of monotheistic trends; however, his spirit (contra monotheism) and his often-inflated rhetoric (privileging of one cult over others) may be at odds with each other in the claim that theater originated out of the cult of Dionysus.

Despite strong evidence regarding the origin of Greek theater out of the cult of Dionysus and the presence of many of its elements in it, there have been many opponents of Nietzsche's conclusion since the publication of his *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872. Willamowitz¹⁰ considers Nietzsche's thesis unfounded and many of his points baseless speculations. Kerényi does not accept Nietzsche's claim that Dionysus is the earliest hero of Greek tragedy; he claims that it is Pentheus.¹¹ Murray and Cornford propose that drama originated out of a celebration of the year-spirit,¹² while stressing the importance of festivals in the culture of Greek drama. On the other hand, Ridgeway professes a tomb or a hero-cult theory,¹³ akin to how some scholars view the origin of contest culture in ancient Greece; according to this theory, tragedy is yet another form of honoring the dead hero whether it is Prometheus, Hercules, Oedipus, Pentheus, or Dionysus. Finally (for this paper, otherwise there are many other positions), Else detaches all cultic origin from Greek tragedy and sees it as an entirely new beginning;¹⁴ she sees it as a "unique event." All of these theories regarding the origin of Greek tragedy emphasize some of its particular aspect, while having weak spots.

¹⁰ *Future Philology! A Reply to Friedrich Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy*, tr. by G. Postl, B. Babich, and H. Schmid, *New Nietzsche Studies*, Volume Four: Nos. 1 & 2, Summer/Fall 2000, pp. 1-33.

¹¹ *Dionysus: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, tr. by R. Manheim, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 324.

¹² G. Murray, "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," in *Themis*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Harrison World Publishing, 1927, esp. p. 341.

F. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, London: Edward Arnold, 1914.

F. Ferguson, *The Idea of a Theatre*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949, p. 26.

¹³ William Ridgeway, *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915; reprinted by Benjamin Bloom, 1964, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ G. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy* (WW Norton & Co., 1965) 2.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's thesis regarding the birth of tragedy opened up a window of research into the ancient Greek world the practices and institutions of which have shaped Western culture for more than two millennia. One question that remains intriguing to me in this research has been the question of the presence of different cult rituals, including that of Dionysus, in Greek tragedy, especially in its early stage. The question of origin is always a difficult one since origins are often shrouded in mystery not to mention the fact that origins are said to be in different ways. Rather than a strictly historical origin, which may be the weakness of *The Birth of Tragedy*, one may reorient oneself to the genealogical origin—a method developed by Nietzsche later—of Greek tragedy and raise the question as to what multiple, often agonistic, forces, specifically those of cult practices, were present in Greek tragedy, what affects they produced in the total experience of tragic spectacle, and what we can learn today from them whether they are rituals of sacrifice, burial, oracle, or *ekstasis*.

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Frank Chouraqui, *Ambiguity and the Absolute: Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty on the Question of Truth*

Reviewed by Nicholas Birns

Frank Chouraqui's invigorating book on Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty is necessarily written in the style of the latter. Merleau-Ponty was a professional philosopher training in the high French tradition, although thoroughly repudiating the Cartesian and rational emphasis of French thought and incorporating copious amounts of Hegel and other German idealists, who, like Marx but in a very different way, he inverted and materialized. Nietzsche, as we too often forget, was not a professional philosopher, but a professional *philologist*, and although he knew the Greek tradition thoroughly he knew it as a lover of words, not as someone who, however rigorously, uses words to delineate concepts. The later Nietzsche ardently, if a tad hyperbolically, put the French on a pedestal, as if to tweak German nationalism by that but Merleau-Ponty is no one's lapidary aphorist, and, because of the influences mentioned above, often has a dense, turgid, Teutonic feel to him. One also feels personal differences (Nietzsche's sex life was both untheorized and unrealized, Merleau-Ponty's, perhaps too theorized, and almost certainly too realized) and divergences of background (Nietzsche a lapsed Lutheran, Merleau-Ponty a never-too-lapsed Catholic) obtrude to make the two thinkers different enough that one has to; 'host' the book even if both are equally its subjects. Chouraqui has quite evidently placed Merleau-Ponty in the position of; 'host'.

Nonetheless he convinces his reader that the two philosophers share an agenda, in opposition to absolute truth-claims and to truth as apprehension in favor of truth as "incorporation" (73). As Chouraqui nimbly explains, incorporation may seem like a seamless transference of the soul's properties to the body,

but in fact can have more discontinuous and even violent aspects, as in the act of being ingested consumed eaten. Inspiration is at, once a form of consumption and of appropriation; and it is the philosopher's task, since we ingest so many ideas anyway, to emphasize that which is good 'food', that is to say truth: and that which is not, which is to say "error." This is complicated in that obviously once one is within either of these thinkers there is no categorical way to divide truth from error; it becomes, at best, a gut feeling.

Nietzsche relies on an alert "self-becoming" (98) to produce a "strong human" capable of exercising thus gut feeling. Importantly, Chouraqui places just the right sort of rhetorical checks on a potentially vulgar voluntarism here, not only using the female pronoun to designate the putative strong human, as if to ward off vulgar-Nietzschean machismo, but stating that she is a "means responsible for an adequate management of the energy available in the world" (102)

This is far more of a bureaucratic than charismatic description fitting more to a moderate Labor government than an ecstatic affirmation of Carl Schmitt-style decisionism, and this sort of social democratic *haleine* is just what Nietzsche needs, the strong human must also be sick, precisely because that vulnerability give she the prudence and discretion to separate, from all the accumulated detritus we incorporate, the good from the bad.

What Nietzsche does not give us is just how to process this incorporation, and this is just what, for Chouraqui, Merleau-Ponty supplies. How he supplies it is via Husserl, the phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, or *epoche*. The phenomenological tradition has stressed what happens after the reduction, or how the reduction is presupposed the reduction really is a sort of thought-experiment; as if we were to bracket this way of apprehension and forgetting the rest." Merleau-Ponty actually examined the term of the reduction. Which implies a softening of being into presence" and a 'sedimentation' (204) of time into history. A satisfactory reduction for Merleau-Ponty is precisely what would be a "failed" (156) one for

Husserl, one that does not manage to make the phenomena pure. For Merleau-Ponty failing in the attempt to purify acknowledges the messiness, the sheer plurality, of how we feel things.

Merleau-Ponty's general aim as a philosopher was to privilege the body over the mind. Yet it is in many ways an idealized-body, a spirit-body, as opposed to Agamben's 'bare life,' it has an organic unity, as opposed to a Deleuzian 'body without organs,' it has a shape and a focus. Though Chouraqui does not cite Agamben, he copiously cites both Bergson and Deleuze, who not only came before and after Merleau-Ponty in a chain of French phenomenological (anti-) idealism but, through Deleuze's appropriation of Bergson, constitute Merleau-Ponty's chief rival, now that he is three generations back of the most vital thinkers working today. Whereas Bergson is much more idealistic (to put it overly but necessarily simply) Deleuze is much more radically skeptical, not affirming the human, incarnate body the way Merleau-Ponty, for all his utilization of the rhetoric of ruptures and crossing, nonetheless does. As Renaud Barbaras, cited by Chouraqui in a footnote, indicates, a Deleuzian Bergson would posit a virtual body where Merleau-Ponty would posit a material one, as reflexive and specular as that materiality might be in its constitution. But the human that is affirmed is torqued, contingent; as Chouraqui notes, whereas most phenomenologists reduce the subjective to get to the objective, Merleau-Ponty takes the objective as his target, shows that any attempt to reduce it must fail, and out of that failure, as a kind of castoff yet fertile byproduct, claims the revelation of materiality.

The very fact that Merleau-Ponty opposes "the dualistic premises of objective thought" (197) so ardently means he must affirm something in return, and here, even though Merleau-Ponty seems so much more systematically anti-idealistic than Nietzsche, so free of Nietzsche's motivational speaker-like exhortations and inspirations, it may well be that Nietzsche, who was willing to debunk without claiming any new ground, is more radical here. Whereas Nietzsche's solution to the problem of the inadequacy of

either general or specific truths is a "health" which flits between possible truths even while avoiding a nihilistic skepticism, for Merleau-Ponty, according to Chouraqui, the equivalent of Nietzsche's health is "a reduction one can achieve through activity: (232). Though Chouraqui, somewhat covering his deconstructive basis here, insists that this activity is only metaphorical, one suspects that for the French thinker it was not just metaphorical, that there was intended for there to be existential authenticity in it.

This book, rightly, leaves the two thinkers and its reader uncertain about whether, if absolute truth is to be jettisoned, the ambiguities (one thinks here of the subtitle of Melville's *Pierre*, or the *Ambiguities*) that replace it are gossamer or substantive. The bravura ending of Chouraqui's provocative book leaves us with this catalyzing quandary. To renounce absolute truth is to see the self-definition of absolute truth as a deceiver, not just a Cartesian malign génie but also a monster-God, a deceiver-demiurge, a truth that shall "objectify, and thereby falsify"(233). It is only by knowing this truth as false that we can find truth. Yet we cannot fall in with the deceiver, as falling in with the deceiver would mean we would blind ourselves into thinking there is objective truth. The deceiver must be proclaimed as supreme, but also as a supreme falsehood. There is no truth outside the great deceiver, and thus truth is many-sided and subjective, not just monolithic and objective. But to truly experience the plurality of truth is not just to celebrate the falsehood of the deceiver but to dissent from it, to rebel against the hegemony of a truth whose arrant falsehood is a necessary prelude to wisdom. Saying that modern thinkers are displaced Gnostics is the most weary of intellectual-historical bromides, but one has to think Gnosticism, with its rhetoric that we are trapped in a material world, yet through knowing ourselves in a trap can see through to the spirit, is pertinent here. We must acknowledge the great deceiver, but by no means "limit ourselves to great deceptions" (234), However critical of the truth of truth, the falsehood of truth here faces an incipient challenge from another falsehood, one with no illusions to being truth, yet which can challenge, against the odds, the hegemony of a false truthfulness. We must first acknowledge the deceiver. But, because we know him as a deceiver, his stranglehold will not persist. Here, we get to a truly Nietzschean sense of paradox, and a refreshing, genuine, idiosyncratic optimism that makes this book's dense and complicated arguments well worth exploring.

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