

*The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of
Philosophy: Nietzsche and the Modern Drama.*

Kornhaber, David.

Reviewed by Dirk R. Johnson

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The Birth of Tragedy remains a seminal text for readers interested in Nietzschean aesthetics. Written when he was still in thrall to Wagner and showing signs of the composer's influence, the *Birth* marks a significant turning-point in Nietzsche's evolution as an independent thinker, and it represents the greatest achievement of Nietzsche's early years. Though he later came to revise, even reject, some of its central claims, Nietzsche's subsequent thoughts continued to gravitate around insights that he first championed there. David Kornhaber's study goes beyond the *Birth* but never strays far from it. For Kornhaber suggests that the philosopher's preoccupation with tragedy and the dramatic arts was not just relegated to the one precocious work, but remained a constant thread throughout his career.

At first glance, Kornhaber would seem to have a hard case to make. Explicit references to tragedy and drama become scarce after Nietzsche's formal rupture from Wagner and his ongoing reassessment of Schopenhauer. Entering what has been termed his positivist phase, Nietzsche endorsed skepticism and a cool scientific detachment that in many ways revived the philological ethos in which he had been trained. Nietzsche was finding his way back to his vocation while searching for signposts beyond it. The illusions of art could no longer conceal the harsh realities he was now willing to face. Though the realm of art—and the hope for a serious tragic art—reappeared in later writings, aesthetics would never again be played out against science as it so naively was in the *Birth*.

Kornhaber covers less those years of disenchantment, instead bringing out new insights from the period prior to the *Birth*. Rather than focus on the larger aesthetic implications of the Dionysian versus the Apollonian, Kornhaber begins by examining the critical tradition from which Nietzsche drew and to which he offered his ambitious contribution. In doing so, Kornhaber cuts through much of the obscurantist fog that has settled on this early text and casts fresh light on the formative context that shaped Nietzsche's reflections.

When Nietzsche set his ideas down, he sought not merely to contribute to, but to directly challenge an illustrious tradition of German theory on the origins and meaning of tragedy. Though inspired by Wagner, Nietzsche was not being disingenuous when he later claimed in his retrospective (EH, BT 4) that he had begun to lay out his own inchoate reflections on the subject of tragedy and had not just been propagandizing for Wagner. Ancient tragedy was clearly at the center of his thinking, and Wagner served as a fertile catalyst for his original reflections on the subject.

Previous theoreticians on tragedy—Aristotle, Lessing, Goethe—had centered their analyses on the *ends* of tragedy—specifically, the higher moral awareness that supposedly accrued from the tragic art. Returning to arguments in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, interpreters focused on the *mechanics* of drama and the artistic means that produced the desired effects of fear, pity, and subsequent catharsis. This text-driven analysis places greater emphasis on the *reader*, who can dissect a work according to an established blueprint. Suspecting that previous theorists had been immune to aesthetic pleasure, Nietzsche redirected attention to the other end—to the *spectator* and to the *performance* itself.

Nietzsche’s early work was an expression of an overall anti-modernist agenda that he shared with Wagner, and they were both confronting the formulaic, plot-driven pieces of successful nineteenth-century—particularly Parisian—drama with a theatrical (German) model that they hoped would reanimate the ancient spirit of classical Greek tragedy. But rather than reject Aristotle, one could say Nietzsche repudiated a specific, superficial reading of the *Poetics*; in this he continued in the “German” tradition of Lessing, who too had critiqued the French and their dramatists’ slavish adherence to the three unities.

Instead of attending to the moral ends of tragedy, Nietzsche inaugurated a different approach: an imaginative reconstruction of ancient tragedy with an emphasis on *performance*—i.e., the function of chorus, acting, lighting, spectacle, and staging (or *Inszenierung*)—in producing a total aesthetic effect. Although this demanded imaginative reconstruction—all we are left with are the texts, after all—it accords with Nietzsche’s Schopenhauer-inspired awareness of *das Tragische*. But though he avoided exclusive focus on the moral aims of tragedy, Nietzsche aligned with his predecessors’ belief that “the tragic” could be *philosophically* circumscribed. A common strain to this scholarly tradition is that “the tragic” is a concept worthy of philosophical reflection in its own right; to lofty critics of tragedy, Aristotle’s *Poetics* was too prosaic—a handbook for playwrights.

Nietzsche’s thoughts on tragic art evolved over time, and there are fewer explicit references to the topic in the period of critical distancing from Wagner. But “[b]y the time of the fifth book of the *Gay Science*,” Kornhaber writes, “Nietzsche’s disparagement of the form would become utterly relentless, every bit as fervent as his support had once been” (p. 41). In conclusion to the first part of his study, Kornhaber turns to two late anti-Wagner texts (*Nietzsche contra Wagner* and *The Case of Wagner* [CW]), which in part included verbatim extracts from his prior works, to highlight a “complete reversal” from his original position in the *Birth*. One interesting late passage Kornhaber fails to mention is in CW 9, where Nietzsche points to Wagner’s dispositional inability to construct a tragic plot: “We know the sort of technical problems that absorb all of a dramatist’s energies, often making him sweat blood: how to give *necessity* to the knot and also to the resolution, so that there is only one possible outcome.”

Contrary to his earlier position, Nietzsche came to suggest that the Aristotelian precepts he had once criticized were perhaps crucial after all and that his original stance, and his thoughts on “the tragic,” were too Hegelian, too dominated by a single “idea” transformed into a metaphysics (EH, ‘Birth’ 1). It now seemed that the intricate craft of the tragedian, derived from a deep awareness of human psychology and character motivation, was relevant, and something he had perhaps underestimated in his initial enthusiastic efforts to inaugurate a new “tragic age.”

At the same time, there did remain constants in his interpretation on the topic—and one of those was his awareness and insistence that tragedy should be understood from a non-moral perspective. Despite subtly shifting his stance on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Nietzsche never deviated from the view that the tragic art transcended modern pessimism, and that it reflected an affirmation of life beyond traditional morality (EH, GT 2). In that sense, Nietzsche was indeed circling back to—and in some ways had never left—the set of concerns that had informed his first major work.

In his compact overview of Nietzsche's final position, he argues that Nietzsche intended to supplant tragedy with his "philosophy of the future" and that *Zarathustra* represented a new "tragic philosophy" that would supersede the tragic art. As Nietzsche conceived it, it would become the cornerstone of a new tragic age, realizing the hopes he had once affixed to the name of Wagner. It is at this point where I would disagree with Kornhaber. While Nietzsche undoubtedly attached great importance to *Zarathustra*, he positioned himself as the first "tragic philosopher" (EH, 'Birth' 3). But this does not need imply that he wished to replace the tragic art form or minimize its unique means of expressing the tragic spirit; it was that art form, after all, that gave birth to our awareness of the tragic phenomenon in the first place.

Nietzsche suggests that all prior *philosophers*, as heirs to an ascetic tradition, remained beholden to the "moral" and could not convey a deeper awareness of what constituted the tragic. His specific ambition, then, was not to substitute philosophy for tragedy or to disparage other art forms—and here he positioned himself decidedly against the example of Plato—but rather to model a type of (tragic) philosophy that he felt had never been realized before and to open up a new pathway for philosophy after it had been fatefully diverted by the Socratic tradition. On the other hand, his final condemnation of Wagner was based on his desire for a return to humility in the arts, and he argued against a "theatocracy" or any one art form becoming absolute, tyrannizing all others. Along these lines, and driven by a "love of art," Nietzsche postulates three "demands" in the conclusion to *The Case of Wagner*, the first of which was "[t]hat Theater does not become master over all the other arts" (CW 12).

Fortunately, the conclusion to the first half of the monograph suggests a more nuanced position. In the section "Friedrich Nietzsche, Theater Lover (Reprise)," Kornhaber claims that Nietzsche in his later creative years continued to follow the contemporary theater scene with great interest: "in every way [he] maintained the pose of someone who had not yet given up hope for the stage, of someone who was still highly conversant on the sub-

ject, of someone who was waiting" (p. 89). He seemed to recognize that the true tragic genius was a random, solitary figure and did not require a theoretical platform or prior revolution in theater practice to produce the tragic effect in the modern age. Although skeptical of his era and large parts of its cultural production, Nietzsche knew that bold experimenters, yet unknown to a broader public, could still produce the kind of hard-edged psychological realism that he admired and that informed the best of ancient tragedy. Unlike Wagner, whose personal cultural ambitions led him to dismiss the contemporary stage, Nietzsche had become selectively more charitable in his estimation of the wide range of innovations in the arts, including in the field of drama.

In the second half of his study, Kornhaber turns specifically to three modern playwrights—August Strindberg, George Bernard Shaw, and Eugene O'Neill—as examples of the kind of dramatic innovators that might have impressed Nietzsche with their work. These three dramatists were themselves deeply influenced by Nietzsche and his musings on drama, and it was above all his ambition for the theater that inspired them to revolutionize dramatic stagecraft.

Strindberg's reading of Nietzsche coincided with the writing of one of his most influential plays, *Miss Julie*, in 1888. By that time, Strindberg had read *Beyond Good and Evil* but would soon read *The Case of Wagner*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Strindberg also followed the series of five influential lectures on Nietzsche that the critic Georg Brandes delivered in spring 1888 at the University of Copenhagen, which helped cement Nietzsche's reputation. By all indications, Strindberg was overwhelmed by Nietzsche when he wrote *Miss Julie* (even though this ardor would significantly cool thereafter). Strindberg shared Nietzsche's antipathy of Wagner, and he wrote in stark opposition to a Wagnerian aesthetic. *Miss Julie* announced a "new direction in the European theater"—one that would start from the naturalist foundation then developing in France but would go beyond it (106). Whereas Wagnerism embraced the grand and

monumental gesture, Strindberg proposed “to take the minutiae of everyday life—the ‘ordinary case’ or ‘corner of nature’ that all naturalists sought—and excavate from within the eternal themes that lay nested inside” (108). And like Nietzsche, Strindberg emphasized theatrical production, above all the collaborative role of the actor; the dramatist would need to think *of* his actors, not *for* them—unlike Wagner, who forced “upon them all manner of contrivances and false sentiments that suit his totalizing need for complete composition and control” (110).

For G.B. Shaw, Nietzsche was less an aesthetic inspiration than an intellectual rival (not surprising for a writer who recognized Nietzsche *and* Wagner as mentors). Many of their views overlapped, though Shaw was keen to accentuate their differences and his own originality. Writing slightly after Strindberg, Shaw introduced Nietzsche and the Nietzschean canon to the English-speaking world. He thus had a broader overview of Nietzsche’s thought, and it resonated throughout his works, such as in *Man and Superman* (1903) and *Major Barbara* (1905), the latter of which Kornhaber examines. While Shaw was drawn to his ideas, he sought to stake out his independence, which meant both affirming and undermining the persona of Nietzsche. Shaw was skeptical of philosophy and its dogmatism, which he felt Nietzsche could not escape, and which was reflected in his ambition for a “philosophy of the future”. Instead, Shaw thought that his drama could better fuse ideas and true artistic representation, thereby avoiding the narrow dogmatism of Apollonian thought. Whereas he saw in Nietzsche an Apollonian thinker lost in Dionysian excess, Shaw instead aimed to insert Dionysian playfulness into a dramaturgical model that engaged with serious ideas in the realm of art. In the end, Shaw contended with Nietzsche not so much as a creative artist, but as a thinker. His chosen field of competition—the stage—could realize his grand ambitions. This often meant obscuring the traces of Nietzsche on his own thinking, while misconstruing Nietzsche’s positions and reducing him into a straw man that Shaw could more easily challenge.

Born into a theatrical family—his father was a famous actor before his star faded—Eugene O’Neill had discovered *Zarathustra* in his youth, describing it as a book that had “influenced me more than any work I’ve ever read” (quote on p. 139 of Kornhaber). Later the *Birth* assumed an even greater significance for his art. Kornhaber suggests that part of Nietzsche’s allure was the intellectual prestige he conferred on O’Neill, which gave his project more gravitas among American audiences and critics. Nietzsche’s ideas influenced the writing of *The Great God Brown* (1926), in which O’Neill deployed heavy Nietzschean symbolism and even incorporated masks to recapture the Hellenic spirit of tragedy. After a period of theatrical failure, O’Neill retreated from theater production, only to write his final masterpiece, *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, first performed posthumously in 1956. It was the work most indebted to Nietzsche’s spirit. “To believe O’Neill’s own writings, almost his entire theatrical project as he understood and articulated it was an attempt to find a means of enacting Nietzsche’s vision of a Dionysian theater in a modern American context: to find a way to ‘the one true theatre’” (p. 149). Here, O’Neill was “liberated to write not for the theater as he found it but for the theater he wanted it to be [...] It is not just a play *for* a perfect theater; it is also a play *about* that theater” (p. 148). Thus, Nietzsche informed O’Neill’s project from beginning to end—from *The Great God Brown* to the twilight triumph of *Long Day’s Journey*.

Kornhaber makes a compelling case for Nietzsche’s seminal impact on modern theater and its most influential practitioners. Nietzsche’s philosophical ideas, and the importance he accorded to theater in his philosophical project, had a fructifying effect on the creative landscape. They gave ambitious playwrights the theoretical ammunition to challenge theatrical conventions and transform theater again into a space for serious artistic reflection and experimentation.

Kornhaber's study presents only two minor quibbles. The two parts of the monograph convey the sense of being two distinct projects, one that deals with Nietzsche and his musings on tragedy, and the other with three modern playwrights, who shared a Nietzschean affinity. Also, Kornhaber does not provide much evidence for—and perhaps overstates—the claim that Nietzsche actively followed modern theater productions—that would seem to require far more than a few scattered mentions—even though I agree that his reflections on tragedy remained central to his thought, and deepened and matured over time. Still, Kornhaber reasserts the primacy of tragedy on Nietzsche's thinking overall, and for that important reason alone his study deserves serious attention in Nietzschean scholarship.