

Myth and the Problem of Initiation in *The Birth of Tragedy*

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Art, in which lying sanctifies itself and the will to deception has good conscience on its side.

– Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, 3.25¹

Introduction:

The Birth of Tragedy is a peculiar book. Its basic thesis, and the consequent reasons for Nietzsche's retrospective criticism of it, were long considered a simple matter in the literature, where the predominant reading saw the work as committed to an essentially Schopenhauerian metaphysics that contradicted Nietzsche's later anti-metaphysical inclinations (Han-Pile, 373). However, the last twenty years have seen a focused re-examination of the book, spearheaded by Peter Poellner and Beatrice Han-Pile, that conclusively renders this convention unsustainable. Not only does a close exam-

¹ Translated by C. Diethe in Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

ination of the *Birth's* metaphysics reveal it to be distinctly different from Schopenhauer's (Han-Pile, 1), due consideration of the relationship between this metaphysics and Nietzsche's other early concerns demands we understand the text as *not* committed to the *truth* of this metaphysics in any normal sense. It seems to be a kind of *myth*, unlikely to be literally true but advanced as a part of a pragmatic project concerned with 'redeeming life' in the realisation of a new tragic culture (Poellner, 2).

This 'new' *Birth* complicates the conventional story of the break between the 'early' and 'later' Nietzsche's - a turn against the possibility of metaphysical knowledge does nothing to explain a break from a project uncommitted to such possibility. Alternative possibilities have been suggested – Poellner points towards a tension involved in believing a redemptive *illusion* whilst recognising that reality is such that it requires redeeming in the first place (Poellner, 75), and Han-Pile argues that even the mere the *symbolic value* of metaphysics rests upon a belief in *intuitive* access to metaphysical knowledge (Han-Pile, 4).

This essay aims to conclusively resolve this question, building upon prior 'mythopoetic' readings of the *Birth* by grounding the belief in its myth in the *personal aesthetic experience* of tragedy. This then engenders a tension between the myth's pretensions to universality and the fact that a *specific character* is required of the spectator to access the experience that enables belief in its healing illusion. This breakdown of this solution rooted in universality then points towards the need for a *plurality of methods* for the affirmation of life, encapsulated in Zarathustra's declaration that "*the way – does not exist!*" (Z 3: "Of the Spirit of Gravity", 2).²

² Translated by R. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.

Part One presents the content of the *Birth's* metaphysics whilst Part Two shows why this metaphysics must be understood in a *particular* mythopoetic sense. Part Three then exposes an irreconcilable problem with the *Birth's* project and demonstrates that resolving it naturally points one towards positions held by the later Nietzsche.

1 - Metaphysics of Tragedy:

It bears remembering that the *Birth of Tragedy* is in fact concerned with discussing the birth of tragedy. The metaphysics that permeates the work is inexorably intertwined with this question, and any reproduction of it should not detach it from this concern. At the centre of this picture is a duality of fundamental artistic “drives” and their characteristic artworks - the “Apollonian” and the “Dionysian” (BT §1)³ - with tragedy involving an interplay between the two (BT §5).

The Apollonian concerns the presentation of individuated figures that, whilst carrying with them a feeling of “complete intelligibility,” are recognised as mere ‘semblances’ or representations, and *always* understood as being *distinct from the spectator*. The pleasure in Apollonian art is the cool contemplation and understanding one experiences wandering through a portrait gallery, expressing an “imperturbable trust” in the ‘principle of individuation’, the way the world appears as a collection of differentiated objects – this includes both you and I, understood as fundamentally separate beings. Consequently, it is associated with arts that involve the presentation of images and symbols, and with the “art world” of the “dream” (BT §1). It is on the *stage* that we find the Apollonian aspects of tragedy, the actors representing the exploits of gods and heroes (BT §8).

3 Translated by R. Spiers, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

The Dionysian, in stark contrast, does not concern the *presentation* of anything *understood* as distinct from the spectator, but rather ‘losing oneself’ in a kind of delirious state, a fusion of “enormous horror” and “blissful ecstasy” when one *thinks* they are experiencing a *breakdown of individuation*. In the Dionysiac experience, like the delirium of dancing at a club, “all the rigid, hostile barriers [...] established between human beings break asunder,” and one feels themselves to belong to a “primal unity,” a “higher community with all of nature”. At its apex, one’s individuated subjectivity ‘vanishes’ “to the point of complete self-forgetting” – from the perspective of the reveller, there is no separation between them and others, nor really a ‘them’ or ‘others’ at all anymore. Consequently it is associated primarily with arts that, like music, don’t involve the presentation of images, and the “art world” of “intoxication” (BT §1). The Dionysian appears within tragedy in the form of the *chorus*, a group of singers that sang dithyrambic hymns narrating the events on stage (BT §7).

It is essential though that we understand these drives “as artistic powers which erupt from nature itself”. Here lies the significance of those ‘art-worlds’ of the dream and intoxication – nature, in giving rise to these states, automatically produces Apollonian and Dionysian experiences. When a human intentionally creates art work they don’t simply produce it from nowhere but reproduce the character of these art-worlds - hence “every artist is an ‘imitator’” (BT §2). This process is described as one in which the ‘original subjectivity’ of the artist melts away as they become a “medium” through which the real creative force, distinctly other to us, is ‘channelled’ (BT §5):

we are not one and identical with the essential being which gives itself eternal pleasure as the creator and spectator of that comedy of art. Only insofar as the genius, during the act of artistic procreation, merges fully with that original artist of the world does he know anything of the eternal essence of art (Ibid).

We human subjects do not really create artwork then, the true source of artistic creativity is “that original artist of the world,” the mysterious “one truly existing subject” that pops up throughout the text with little explanation (Ibid). The retrospective ‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’ provides some much needed clarification. Here Nietzsche tells us the *Birth* recognises a ‘hidden meaning’ behind the world, an:

amoral artist-god who frees himself [...] from suffering the oppositions packed within him, [...] becom[ing] conscious of his autarchic power and constant delight and desire, whether he is building or destroying, whether acting benignly or malevolently. The world as the [...] eternally changing, eternally new vision of the most suffering being of all, [...] able to redeem and release itself only in semblance (BT §P5).

Nature is itself an artistic creation. The ‘artist-god’, the ‘one truly existing subject’, is prompted by its suffering to create and destroy these worlds of individuated ‘semblances’ like ours. That feeling of primordial unity in the Dionysiac experience is closely associated with this divine figure. In that ecstasy one is ‘carved’ by “the chisel-blows of the Dionysiac world artist” - one ‘feels thy creator’ (BT §1).

- The Affective Machinery of Tragedy:

So how exactly do these two artistic drives interact within tragedy, and why does this produce the “prophylactic healing energies” that Nietzsche labels its “supreme value” (BT §21)? Firstly, this interplay between the Dionysian and Apollonian produces a special kind of spectator. Conventional aesthetic theory, at least according to Nietzsche, saw the spectator as characteristically Apollonian - always “conscious of the fact that what he saw before him was

a work of art and not empirical reality” (BT §7) - and consequently captures how we might expect tragedy to be experienced were we to see the events on stage as its primary component. However, the Apollonian stage was in-fact a *later* innovation, supplementing the originary *Dionysiac* chorus by representing the content of their hymns (BT §22). Nietzsche takes this seriously.

The immediate effect of the chorus is to induce in the audience a sense of “metaphysical solace,” a feeling that “despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable”. This solace is an effect of the Dionysiac experience - the feeling of absorption into a ‘primordial unity’ - and cannot normally last beyond it, the return of ‘normal perception’ being “experienced [...] with a sense of revulsion,” bringing with it a “longing for a world beyond death” (BT §7). However, as we shall see, the intercession of the Apollonian elements of tragedy allows for this solace to be carried into sobriety, saving the spectators from this “ascetic” hangover. For now, in their rapture of delirious oneness, the audience experiences the figures on stage not as semblances *distinct from them* but as *real figures identical with themselves*, equally sharing in that ‘primordial unity’. The original tragic experience involved “seeing oneself transformed before one’s eyes and acting as if one had really entered another body”. This effect becomes more profound when we remember that this Apollonian element was added to *supplement* the chorus. The actors are in the service of the dithyrambic hymns, they concretely visualise the religious narratives that before could only be imagined by those listening. The drama then presents the content of the Dionysiac delirium transformed into images, the spectators witness what they feel inside them played out before them - the stage is like a projection of a vision that originates from the chorus (BT §8). The result is that the audience feels as though they created the events on stage, their ecstasy “discharges itself over and over again” into the dramatic presentation (BT §7).

It is not immediately clear *why* this intervention of the Apollonian in tragedy produces a healing, life affirming force that ‘redirects’ “repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live” (Ibid). Nietzsche tells us that the teaching of tragedy is something that seems like a purely Dionysian insight, the kind that before produced an ‘ascetic hangover’ - “the view that individuation is the primal source of all evil; and art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, a premonition of unity restored” (BT §10). Elsewhere though we are told the “peculiar effect” of tragedy is “an Apollonian deception, by means of which we are to be saved from direct oneness with Dionysiac music, while our musical excitement can discharge itself in an [...] interposed, visible, middle world” (BT §24), and that, in it, the tragic hero “lifts the whole Dionysiac world on to his back, relieving us of its burden” (BT §21).

The idea seems to be that the Apollonian elements of tragedy shield the spectators from the negative effects of the Dionysian whilst allowing the positive ones through. This shielding effect owes to the ability of the Apollonian to introduce *myth* into the aesthetic experience: between the audience and the Dionysiac music “tragedy places a supreme symbolic likeness - myth”. The myth then “shields us from music,” but, and this is crucially important, music also *empowers the myth*, granting it “a convincing metaphysical significance to which word and image alone [...] could never attain” (BT §21). Since the Dionysian works though “purely affective content” and “unreflective action” the ‘metaphysical solace’ it generates cannot ordinarily be sustained outside its grasp (Han-Pile, 385), but the Apollonian element of myth can capture that affective content in a *symbolic* form, a meaningful story that can survive beyond the trance. This myth might not be very persuasive on its own – you probably haven’t been convinced of this

metaphysical picture simply by my relaying it in text – but *precisely because it is relayed via tragedy*, with the powerful Dionysian force of music behind it, one becomes convinced of its truth when normally one would not, “overcome by that certain foreknowledge of a supreme delight reached by a path leading through destruction and negation” (BT §21).

To reiterate, the unique effect of tragedy is to transform the intuitive, non-representational metaphysical solace of the Dionysian trance - faith in the possibility of escaping individuation into a ‘primordial unity’ and awareness of our status as aesthetic creations of an artist-god - into a *meaningful symbolic representation* of that solace whilst simultaneously inducing the spectator to *believe in that symbolic meaning*, and hence carry it with them in their normal life, preventing a lapse into asceticism. The further question of *why* believing this myth produces a ‘healing power’ will be addressed in the next section. Before this though, it is essential we remember that this analysis of tragedy means more to Nietzsche than mere abstract historical knowledge. At the time of the *Birth* he saw in German culture the possibility of a *rebirth* of tragedy in a *new* tragic culture – tragedy could again perform the same vitalising social function for the Germans as it did for the classical Greeks (BT §20). There was a *transformation of life* at stake in the *Birth* then, a hope for a society permeated by performances of works like Wagner’s, where *everyone* would incorporate the tragic myth and receive its solace, producing a powerful, optimistic people that could achieve great feats.

2 - Myth and Metaphysic:

As mentioned earlier, early Nietzsche’s talk of Apollonian and Dionysian has often been interpreted as a wholehearted acceptance of Schopenhauerian metaphysics. To briefly summarise, Schopenhauer developed a somewhat strange version of transcendental idealism. On his view, following Kant, our familiar world of individuated objects causally interacting in time and space was *constructed* by our minds as they process and interpret the mind-indepen-

dent, unindividuated and non-spatiotemporal *fundamental reality* of things in themselves. But whilst for Kant positive knowledge of this realm was fundamentally impossible, concepts only being applicable within the bounds of our phenomenal reality, Schopenhauer claimed we could have *intuitive* insight there. For him, the thing in itself was 'the Will', a kind of blind striving, eternally unfulfilled and therefore essentially suffering. Importantly, music is privileged in Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory, for whilst other art forms operate by presenting copies of mediated aspects of the Will - 'Ideas' that are somehow 'in between' the unindividuated independent reality and the fully individuated phenomenal world - music is a "copy of the will itself" (Schopenhauer, 374).

It's easy to see how the *Birth* could be interpreted within this schema, the Dionysian corresponding to the unindividuated reality of the Will presented through music and the Apollonian to this individuated world of representation - Nietzsche even explicitly says that Dionysiac music "appears as will" (BT §6). On this reading, tragedy would 'work' because it conveyed real metaphysical truths through real experiences of the breakdown of individuation. There's a small problem though - Poellner conclusively demonstrates that by the time Nietzsche wrote the *Birth* he rejected Schopenhauer's metaphysics.

In a fragment written two years prior, Nietzsche attacks Schopenhauer on a number of points. Broadly though, his critique is Kantian - placing the Will as thing-in-itself is "logically arbitrary" as there can be no rational demonstration of anything beyond representation, only, as Schopenhauer freely admitted, a 'poetic intuition'. Furthermore, he suggests that predicating attributes to things in themselves, even speculatively, could be *meaningless* - when we lift terms out of their familiar context and apply them to something "totally foreign" to *anything* we could ever encounter, it's hard

to see what meaning they could convey (Poellner, 63). In-fact, Nietzsche endorses an even stronger prohibition on talk of independent reality than Kant - we can't know things in themselves exist *at all!* "There *might* be a thing-in-itself" and said thing "*might* be the Will," but that *might* is all we can say (Poellner, 64, emphasis mine).

A closer look at the *Birth's* metaphysics reveals other elements incompatible with Schopenhauer. Firstly, if it is the Will, eternal *suffering*, that lies at the heart of the *Birth's* reality, how could *solace* be produced from merging with it in the Dionysiac delirium (Han-Pile, 377)? Following Han-Pile, Nietzsche's 'primordial unity' must contain pleasure as well as pain (Han-Pile, p.379). Secondly, on the Schopenhauerian reading we should expect the Dionysiac state to be epistemically privileged, a revelation regarding the *true* nature of reality - but we find the opposite, it is consistently characterised as *illusory* (Han-Pile, 378). Lastly there's that 'artist-god'. Unlike Schopenhauer's blind, impersonal force that is *represented* to subjects by their minds in the form of individuated reality, the world-artist at the heart of the *Birth's* reality is a personal figure that *intentionally creates* individuated worlds (Han-Pile, 380). This metaphysics actually has more in common with the pre-socratics than Transcendental Idealism - rather than being created by our minds, the world is produced *independently of us* by an ontologically primary creative force (Han-Pile, 382). If anything though, this new picture flaunts the prohibition on mind-independent reality *even more* than Schopenhauer's. What exactly is going on?

Here Poellner is incredibly useful, situating the *Birth* within a much broader picture of the young Nietzsche's concerns. At the time of writing, Nietzsche ascribed to a kind of pessimism grounded in two *facts* about reality that together he labelled the "evil original constitution of being" (Poellner, 70). Firstly, "the accidental character of our existence" - the lack of a kind of purposeful grounding to our lives that would be bestowed by, for example, Christianity, if only we could know it to be true (Poellner, 69) - and, secondly, the "egoism" of human nature - that *all* human desires are fundamentally

“self-directed” (Poellner, 70). Now Nietzsche saw a solution to this problem - ‘redeeming’ nature through the achievement of a “higher self” in which our natural egoism is supplanted by a “form of eros” (Ibid). Unfortunately, he also thought this eros was *impossible* (this even being empirically demonstrable, with Darwin’s work on evolution supposedly providing one proof of this). This curious joint commitment to both the necessity and impossibility of the ‘redemption of nature’ produces the fundamental guiding thought of Nietzsche’s early period - that “human greatness” lies in a struggle with reality itself, acting as if this ‘higher self’ was attainable despite the ‘tyranny of the real’ (Poellner, 72). In Poellner’s words, “the will-to-live cannot deny itself, but it can create for itself the illusion of doing so” (Poellner, 73).

Considered in this context of this struggle the *Birth’s* metaphysics becomes a *healing illusion* – a myth (Poellner, 67). Poellner relays three characteristics of ‘myth’ in the *Birth*: Firstly, “a story [...] which connects the temporal flux of appearances to an underlying ontological ground” in a manner not capturable by rational explanation; secondly, a story that connects “human experiences [...] to a purposeful non-temporal order of reality”; and lastly, an illusion, a literally false story (Poellner, 64-65). On our reading the *Birth’s* metaphysics fits all these characteristics. The ‘world-artist’ at its centre forms an ontological ground for the ‘flux of appearances’ but importantly, and unlike Schopenhauer’s Will, it does so in a way that grants our human lives a non-accidental character – we are art, the product of a god that creates in order to discharge its suffering. But if Schopenhauer’s metaphysics was ‘logically arbitrary’ then this ‘artist’s metaphysic’ must be too - that is to say it is also a myth in the third sense, at the very least incredibly unlikely to be literally true.

Belief in the *Birth’s* metaphysics addresses both prongs of the ‘tyranny of real’. The ‘world-artist’ addresses the first prong - a created existence is not accidental - and as for the second - the ‘egoism’ of the human subject - this is precisely what the ‘metaphysical solace’ of the Dionysiac experience, translated into the symbolic myth by tragedy, underwrites. Incorporation of

‘the premonition of unity restored’ would lead to exactly the ‘higher state’ Nietzsche describes, life lived ‘almost no longer individually’. Incorporation of the tragic myth convinces us “that even the ugly and disharmonious is an artistic game,” the product of a kind of transcendent playfulness not dissimilar from that of the famous Heraclitian child. Having felt oneself, and the whole individuated world, to be the product of this artistic play, and, equally, having felt oneself dissolved by it, life, and the world as whole, can be grasped not just as *an* “aesthetic phenomenon,” but as *one* “aesthetic phenomenon,” unified as a single work by a single creator, and, furthermore, also a pleasurable one, sharing in that “primal pleasure” that one can “perceive even in pain” (BT, §24). To experience the tragic mode then is to first feel the truth of this pleasurable unity of primordial aesthetic play within and without oneself, and then to “justify by [that] play the existence of even the ‘worst of all worlds” (BT, §25).

Now, Poellner contends that since the *Birth’s* metaphysics is *intended* to function as myth, its actual content represents a somewhat arbitrary “filling in” on the mythic schema (Poellner, 68). Han-Pile responds that it is not arbitrary insofar as it is designed to promote certain beneficial effects for life (Han-Pile, 395). But they both miss another crucial aspect in which the metaphysic is resolutely *not* arbitrary – that is precisely how it *describes and captures the experience of tragedy*. In the later sections of the text Nietzsche always supplements his descriptions of the effects of tragedy with the request that the reader relate them to their own experiences of the works that constituted its rebirth, namely those of Wagner (BT, §§21-22). I would suggest that the metaphysics are best understood as *capturing this experience* – not describing the true nature of reality, but what that *would be if* how tragedy made you feel was ‘real’.

Because of course the problem with a healing illusion is that one must believe in it for it to work, particularly challenging in our case because we must believe something that contradicts our rational knowledge of reality. But tragedy, evoking powerful aesthetic experiences as it does, is *incredibly*

proficient at installing beliefs – the music bestows a ‘convincing significance’ that symbols alone could never achieve. But, of course, it cannot install *any* belief, they must ‘match up’ to the aesthetic experience; the myth-to-be-believed must seem to symbolise, preserve in a fixed meaning, the affective experience of the spectator – but this is precisely what the *Birth’s* metaphysics does.

A consequence of this is that, from our ‘rational perspective’ outside this belief, the aesthetic experience seems to come *prior* to the world-picture that is meant to ground it. This will later produce a disastrous problem for the whole project, but for now we should note it solves the problem of the ‘illusory’ nature of the Dionysian trance. The text itself is written from this external ‘rational’ perspective, hence the ‘assumptive language’ Han-Pile notes at several points in the text (Han-Pile, 393). From ‘outside’ *of course the Dionysiac is illusory* – the revellers feel precisely what we *know* to be impossible.

To summarise, on our interpretation the *Birth* is a strategic work, it sees in its subject a power strong enough to make us believe what we ordinarily couldn’t – a healing illusion that, in our incorporation of it, counteracts the evil nature of existence precisely because we can now heroically believe it to be otherwise. This does however pose a problem for our broader understanding of Nietzsche’s intellectual development. For now, the *Birth* is not committed to the possibility of ‘true’ metaphysical knowledge, only to the fact that people can *believe* metaphysical claims, and hence the conventional view that a turn towards the impossibility of such knowledge, or at the very least a distaste for such beliefs, marked Nietzsche’s transition into his later works is now unsustainable. We will end then with a new account of the motivations behind Nietzsche’s departure from his early project.

3 - The Problem of Initiation:

An immediate doubt we might have about this mythopoetic project concerns how someone like Nietzsche, within the ‘rational perspective’ and convinced of the impossibility of eros, could ever receive the healing effects from the illusion tragedy produces – how can value ‘beyond the self’ motivate the actions of a subject “once it is clear-headedly recognised as illusory” (Poellner, 74)? This problem dissolves though once we take the affective power of tragedy seriously. When Nietzsche provides an example of the “pure and unalloyed effect of musical tragedy,” he is presumably reporting his own experience:

watching the myth as it moved before him, he felt himself elevated to a kind of omniscience, [...] as if, with the help of music, he were now able to see before him, in sensuously visible form, so to speak, the undulations of the Will [...] He comprehends events on the stage to their innermost core, and yet he gladly flees into the incomprehensible. [...] He shivers in horror at the sufferings which will befall the hero, and yet they give him a premonition of a higher, far more overwhelming delight (BT §22).

Clearly Nietzsche did receive from tragedy the effects he ascribes to it. One can imagine him being affected so strongly in the wake of such experiences that he temporarily found himself doubting the ‘tyranny of the real’, at least until he returned to the question with a rational philosophical mindset. But in a new tragic culture, where the tragic experience permeated daily life, this resurgence of the real would be avoided, faith in the healing myth being regularly renewed by the power of music. There is in-fact no contradiction between believing the ‘illusory’ content of the myth and the real nature of reality because, contra both Poellner and Han-Pile, *the subject never believes both at the same time.*

There is, I think, a different insurmountable problem, grounded in the fact that, from the ‘outside’, the aesthetic experience precedes the healing myth, and that belief in the myth demands access to that aesthetic experience. See, Nietzsche explicitly admits that he can only expect a specific kind of spectator to share these experiences with him - “those who have a direct affinity with music” (BT §21). But what would it mean to have this ‘direct affinity’? Presumably to experience in music what the text describes, to feel like it presents you with an insight into the bubbling heart of reality – in other words, to relate to it in such a way that it convinces you of the picture of reality that the myth-metaphysic is supposed to represent.

Nietzsche retrospectively described the book as “for the initiated [...] who, from the very beginning, are linked to one another by shared, rare experiences of art” (BT §P3). If one must already be ‘initiated’ to have the aesthetic experience required to be ‘healed’ by tragedy, then the establishment of a new tragic culture demands a mass ‘initiation’ of society. One might think this is the role the *Birth* was intended to play, but we’ve already seen that its metaphysics is not convincing without the persuasive power of that aesthetic experience *only available to the already-initiated*. Albeit by a different route, we have arrived at a criticism Han-Pile levels at the *Birth* – “it is almost impossible to be convinced by [myth] unless we already have had the kind of experience conveyed by the myth” (Han-Pile, 396).

Why is this so problematic though? Surely, it’s just so much worse for the ‘uninitiated’? It’s because, as we already know, maintenance of the ‘redeemed state’ demands its suspension *in a culture*. When we connect this fact to a *fourth* aspect of myth in the *Birth*, one not mentioned by Poellner, a point of failure is revealed, the resolution of which naturally leads one to certain positions held by the later Nietzsche. That fourth aspect is its association with *universality* – it “needs to be felt keenly as a unique example of something universal and true which gazes out into infinity” (BT §17).

Since one who believes a myth must believe it to be universal, addressing everyone identically since, from the perspective of the believer, everyone occupies their world, their continued belief in said myth demands that *everyone can receive the same experience the myth symbolises*. From the perspective of an ‘initiate’ ‘within’ the *Birth*’s metaphysics *everybody* should receive from tragedy the same power aesthetic experience they do, since for them this has nothing to do with their particular character but simply follows from the laws of reality. But we’ve already seen that this simply isn’t the case, and so a new tragic culture, full of ‘uninitiated’ individuals unable to access the tragic experience that enables belief in the healing myth, would undermine itself – precisely this failure to affect everyone identically would dispel the illusion in those for whom it ‘worked’.

Nietzsche later remarked that “behind my first period grins the face of Jesuitism: I mean, the conscious holding-fast to illusion and its compulsory incorporation as the *basis of culture*” (KSA 10:16[23], 507, emphasis in original)⁴. As well as indicating a general movement towards a greater scepticism regarding the usefulness of illusions, this comment also captures the problem we’ve just exposed. It is an unavoidable issue for any attempt to affirm life through the incorporation of ‘universal illusions’ - including the mythopoeic project, as we have described it - that they simultaneously demand they be embedded in social practices, in a culture, and that all in said culture can believe in them. It’s not surprising then that in the later Nietzsche the task of cultivation towards the possibility of affirming life is consistently portrayed as a *personal* one, sensitive to the unique character and constitution of the individual concerned. This commitment to particularity is encapsulated in Zarathustra’s response to those asking for ‘*the way*’, a universal solution to ‘bearing life’: “this – is now my way: where is yours?” he asks, “for *the way* – does not exist!” (Z 3: “Of the Spirit of Gravity”, 2, emphasis in original).

⁴ Translation by G. Waite in: Waite, G. *Nietzsche’s Corps/e*. Duke University Press. 1996, 314.

The mythopoetic project, committed to universality at its core, is one such doomed attempt to construct 'the way', in this case a new tragic culture wherein everyone affirms life by the same method – belief in the healing myth bestowed unto them by tragedy. But not everyone is an 'initiate', and those who aren't have no choice but to affirm life by another method. The project fails precisely because it tries to work for everyone. With this retrospective clarity we can now see Nietzsche's early project embodies a movement in which 'the way' automatically shatters into *many different ways* – the failure of an approach grounded in universality gives way to a demand for a plurality of methods with fidelity to the particular.

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