



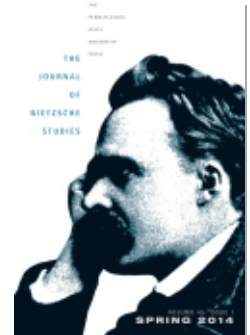
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Orchestral Metaphysics

The Birth of Tragedy between Drama, Opera, and Philosophy

STEPHEN MULHALL

ABSTRACT: This article argues that Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is an attempt to forge a mode of discourse that draws equally upon the resources of tragic drama, opera, and philosophy, and thereby attempts to disclose their internal relatedness, in order both to exemplify and to enable the attainment of a nonelitist species of perfectionism—one that has both an individual and a cultural dimension (with the latter finding expression in a willingness to question and reconfigure existing boundaries between the moral, the political, and the aesthetic domains, among others). The article thereby contributes to an interpretative tradition initiated in recent work by James Conant and Stanley Cavell, by extending its range of textual application.

Although it can hardly be denied that *BT* is—as its first paragraph declares—centrally concerned to advance the science of aesthetics by coming to grips with the essence of Attic tragedy, it should not be forgotten that its author also characterizes the book (in its foreword) as being in constant conversation with Richard Wagner, and hence as a continuation of their joint struggle properly to grasp the true purpose and full value of Wagnerian opera, understood as aspiring to the status of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. One might say that *BT* is an attempt to make sense of the Wagner circle's habit of referring to their leader as Aeschylus—to ground Nietzsche's intuition that the work of both men embodies an enigmatic sublimity of a distinctive kind, one that can properly be individuated only by placing each in the light cast by the other. To christen Wagner as Aeschylus reborn is to say not just that Wagnerian opera can be rightly understood only as a transfiguration of Attic tragic drama, but also that Attic tragic drama can be rightly understood only if seen as essentially capable of such transfiguration. The genealogical narrative that Nietzsche unfolds, with Aeschylus at the origin and Wagner as its present culmination, is thus a way of rendering perspicuous aspects of the essence of each body of work that might otherwise remain occluded, while recognizing that their distinctive sublimity would be lost if its enigmatic quality were ever (*per impossibile*) entirely dissipated.

It is not surprising that a young philologist of exceptional gifts, encountering works of art of whose excellence he is immediately convinced, but who cannot as immediately articulate the grounds of that conviction to his own satisfaction (any more than can the creator of those works), should turn for illumination to the unchallenged exemplars of artistic excellence with which he has been so much preoccupied. But this particular philologist was also a philosopher—someone whose formation included immersion in Schopenhauer, and thereby in Kant’s world-historical transfiguration of the metaphysical impulse that first found its distinctively philosophical expression in Plato. Consequently, the conversation between Wagner and Aeschylus that informs *BT* in fact involves a third party—call him Schopenhauer as Educator, the teacher who makes it possible to read Kant as a culminating, subversive transfiguration of Socrates, the exemplary philosopher.

Suppose we regard the author of *BT* as the site or vessel of this three-cornered conversation. What form of writing might he forge to embody such an exchange—one in which each contributor might retain his individuality without denying his internal relatedness to the others? Can there be a mode of discourse that makes equal, and equally essential, reference to opera, tragic drama, and philosophy, tapping into the distinctive powers of each without corrupting the fruitfulness of all? Just what kind of text is *BT*?

The Satyr’s Vision: Tragic Drama

Nietzsche’s vision of Attic tragedy is crystallized in *BT* 8, and the following paragraphs summarize its main elements:

Enchantment is the precondition of all dramatic art. In this enchanted state the Dionysiac enthusiast sees himself as a satyr, and *as a satyr he in turn sees the god*, i.e., in his transformed state he sees a new vision which is the Apolline perfection of his state. With this new vision the drama is complete.

This insight leads us to understand Greek tragedy as a Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again in an Apolline world of images. Thus the choral passages which are interwoven with the tragedy are, to a certain extent, the womb of the entire so-called dialogue, i.e., of the whole world on stage, the drama proper. This primal ground of tragedy radiates, in a succession of discharges, that vision of drama which is entirely a dream-appearance, and thus epic in nature; on the other hand, as the objectification of a Dionysiac state, the vision represents not Apolline release and redemption in semblance, but rather the breaking-asunder of the individual and its becoming one with the primal being itself. Thus drama is the Apolline embodiment of Dionysiac insights and effects [. . .]. (*BT* 8)¹

The basic claim here is that the tragic chorus is the artistic imitation of a more primitive, more explicitly religious phenomenon—that of the agitated mass of Dionysus’s servants shouting in jubilation as they are seized by moods and

insights so powerful that they transform themselves before their own eyes, making them think that they are seeing themselves restored to what they regard as the fundamental spirit of nature—the satyrs (hybrids of the human and the equine, emblems of the omnipotent life force). In that transfigured state, they undergo a vision of their god, Dionysus, as the underlying truth of things, a revelation of reality in comparison to which real experience is mere appearance. Following his methodological principle that origins manifest essence, Nietzsche invites us to understand the chorus in Attic tragedy as an artistic reconstitution of the satyr chorus, and as itself the primal ground or heart of the tragic drama it helps constitute.

In this way, he finds aesthetic and metaphysical significance in an architectural fact about Attic tragedy—that the place of the chorus in Greek theaters was the orchestra, a semicircular area in front of the stage. The scene of their singing and dancing was thus essentially liminal with respect to both drama and spectators, internally related to both and so not exclusively identifiable with either. The chorus was Janus-faced—it was capable of engaging with the characters in the drama in ways not available to mere spectators, and yet its distinctive theatrical space makes it the innermost of the concentric circles of terraces on which those spectators sat (taking in both the drama as a whole and the cultural world of which it was the expression), inviting them not only to view but to identify with the chorus, and thereby to overcome their metaphysical distance from the drama in which that chorus is involved. The chorus' function as participant-observers thus allows the audience to experience the drama as if they too were participants in it.

The dramatic action on stage is then to be understood as a vision of the chorus, and so of the audience—a vision of their suffering, glorified master, Dionysus. As Nietzsche puts it, “Right down to Euripides Dionysus never ceased to be the tragic hero, and [. . .] all the tragic figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus, etc., are merely masks of that original hero, Dionysus” (*BT* 10). By this, Nietzsche means (at least) that these tragic figures are not so much individuals as individualities, mythic archetypes rather than particular embodied souls; that they are no more absolutely distinguishable from the chorus and so from the audience than they are from one another or from the god they body forth; and that their vicissitudes reveal the vulnerability of our moral status to unfathomable contingency (as Oedipus is polluted by deeds whose nature and consequences exceed the reach of his intentions), the ultimate unintelligibility of reality (with Oedipus's mastery of the Sphinx's riddle being shown to be both catastrophic in consequence and yet merely apparent, since he cannot utilize his ability to define human being in general in order to comprehend himself or his human others), and the origin of human suffering as lying in the fate or condition of individuality as such rather than anything that specific individuals happen to do or suffer.

But Nietzsche's claim is that these Dionysian insights and effects (of both content and form) are given Apolline embodiment—in his terms, that the dramatic vision the chorus discharges is essentially a dream appearance. By this he means (at least) that it discloses a divine power that is independent of those to whom it is made manifest; that the god manifests himself as a sequence of erring, striving protagonists; that those protagonists participate in a representation of release and redemption, even if not release and redemption *by* representation—by means of semblance or image making; and that while the distinctions between character, chorus, and audience are problematized or weakened, they are not entirely deconstructed. In short, the womb of Dionysian ecstasy does and must discharge itself in structured, ordered words and deeds: its prodigious episodes of collectively declaimed words interwoven with music and dance engender modes of speech that incarnate a form of aesthetic and dramatic fulfillment in the absence of dance and music, and in the mouths of recognizably individual speakers.

By thus understanding the tragic chorus as an aesthetic transfiguration of the satyr chorus, and viewing the dramatic whole of which that chorus is a part in the terms provided by his interpretation of that part, Nietzsche makes good on his opening claim—that Attic tragedy not only presents miraculous events (such as Oedipus's redemptive transfiguration at Colonus) but is itself a metaphysical miracle, a work of art that is Apolline and Dionysian in equal measure, an unprecedented pairing of two conflictual but productive artistic drives that Nietzsche names after the two Greek deities of art—Apollo standing for image making and sculpture, and Dionysus for the imageless art of music.

Attic tragedy therefore establishes that the complementarity of Apollo and Dionysus is at least as important as their conflict. For while the culture that first acknowledged them initially understood them as essentially oppositional, hence as primarily revealing fundamental differences between individual art forms (as well as divisions within the impulses which give rise to artistic creation, and rifts in the underlying reality from which those creations emerge and into which they aspire to penetrate), the genealogical productivity of their mutual antagonism ultimately revealed an enigmatic but undeniable mutual dependence: a realization that each found its highest expression within the highest expression of the other. To regard each as essentially sunderable from the other would be to occlude the capacity of each to break itself asunder, overcoming its initial absolute individuality or distinctness in order to become more than it could otherwise be, and thereby more itself. And in so doing, it discloses the mysterious primal unity of being.

Nietzsche's opening, summary articulation of this central point about the pairing of Dionysus and Apollo depicts it in terms of a productive mutual provocation at once akin to and different from that of reproduction by sexual difference. First the stimulation of each by the other induces each to produce

even more vigorous offspring of its own (each being thereby the womb for its own progeny). Then an artistic form is established that is equally indebted to both—in which the Dionysian element forms the womb for the Apolline, but the Apolline perfects the Dionysian, so that its divine vision might be externalized and so rendered viewable, and a coherent embodiment for the womb that is compelled to discharge or project that vision might be engendered. This artistic progeny is thus a hybrid: it both contains and constitutes an aesthetic and metaphysical centaur.

Can one say the same of *BT* itself? Since it presents Attic tragedy as a centaur, it certainly contains one. Can it also be said to constitute one? According to the account of the centaur it contains, the essence of that hybrid resides in a transfiguration of the satyr chorus, in which state or condition the Dionysiac enthusiast sees himself as a satyr, and as such suffers a vision of his god that perfects the state in which he suffers it. Can this characterization be applied to the author of that account?

Suppose we begin with that author's vision—in this case, a vision of Attic tragedy. It is certainly one that regards the constituent elements of that genre as various, internally related manifestations or masks of a divine duality, godheads engaged in a drama of conflict and redemption in which their distinctive identities are provisionally and miraculously overcome, and so in which the vicissitudes of that archetypal pairing make darkly visible the primal unity of all things. To this extent, *BT* plainly reproduces the basic structure of the phenomenon its opening sections depict.

That depiction more specifically claims that the visions with which it is concerned take the form of tragic mythical dramas. Can the depiction itself be said to manifest (inflections of) the same three formal features? The broader historical narrative that contextualizes Nietzsche's account of Attic tragedy suggests an affirmative answer. The tragic dimension of that narrative lies in its basic structure of birth, death (or suicide), and prophesied, transfiguring rebirth. And its mythic status is reinforced by the fact that the narrative is genealogical in form: for each succeeding episode thereby appears as a further manifestation of the fate of the divine duality of Apollo and Dionysus. The key characteristic of mythic logic central to Nietzsche's reading of Attic tragedy—its conviction that apparently diverse and distinct phenomena are in truth metamorphoses of one or two timeless, underlying principles or powers—is thereby generalized, so that the whole of human history in the West is dramatized as a series of masks or manifestations of these dual divinities, each a more or less productive variation upon the original stock (an effect of their mutual excitation, whether irritable or arousing, and of exogenous shocks or graftings).

Many of Nietzsche's own remarks about myth prepare us for the thought that the remarks themselves should be seen as being as much mythological in status as exercises of historical scholarship. He defines myth as "the most significant

example,” and tragic myth as “myth which speaks of Dionysiac knowledge in symbols”—both definitions patently possessed of reflexive application, given *BT*’s deployments of Apollo and Dionysus as infinitely suggestive exemplars of the primal unity of being (*BT* 16). He further associates myth with the basic structure of genealogical narrative when he attributes to myths a “natural tendency to go on living and to throw out new shoots” (*BT* 10), as well as a vulnerability to intellectual skepticism whose pressures result in the transformation of myth into a finished sum of historical events whose credibility wanes in proportion to the extent to which they are dogmatically asserted, until the myth then wilts, discolors, and finds that its blossoms and leaves are scattered to the four winds.

What, then, of the idea that *BT* exemplifies an essentially dramatic mode of vision? Nietzsche specifies the category of the dramatic, understood in comparison with that of the poetic, in the following way:

What makes a poet a poet is the fact that he sees himself surrounded by figures who live and act before him, and into whose innermost essence he gazes [. . .]. For the genuine poet metaphor is no rhetorical figure, but an image which takes the place of something else, something he can really see before him as a substitute for a concept [. . .]. . . . one only has to have the ability to watch a living play continuously and to live constantly surrounded by crowds of spirits, then one is a poet; if one feels the impulse to transform oneself and to speak out of other bodies and souls, then one is a dramatist.

Dionysiac excitement is able to transmit to an entire mass of people this artistic gift of seeing themselves surrounded by just such a crowd of spirits with which they know themselves to be inwardly one. This process of the tragic chorus is the original phenomenon of *drama*—this experience of seeing oneself transformed before one’s eyes and acting as if one had really entered another body, another character. (*BT* 8)

The thought that, in these terms, Nietzsche envisions his own work as going beyond the poetic to the dramatic helps to account for his use of a literary technique that Silk and Stern rightly describe as pervasive in *BT*, and which they label “metalepsis” (that is, metonymy, but of a double, complicated or indirect kind). What they have in mind is Nietzsche’s tendency to depict the character and vicissitudes of a phenomenon in terms provided by aspects or elements of the phenomenon itself—as when Apolline culture is depicted in terms appropriate to Apolline art (“the glorious Olympian figures [. . .] stand on the gable of this structure” [*BT* 3]), or Attic tragedy is equated with two tragic characters (“at once Antigone and Cassandra” [*BT* 4]), or the power of a myth is described in terms of the powers belonging to a mythological character (“it rises once more like a wounded hero” [*BT* 10]), or the passing of tragedy is characterized in terms of the lamented death of a mythic god (“Great Pan is dead!” [*BT* 11]).²

Our discussion suggests a way of understanding why this technique is so appropriate and so effective: for it amounts to Nietzsche’s writing not just as if the mythical figures of Greek tragic drama were living incarnations of concepts

(so that his thinking is, as it were, poetic—literally figurative), but as if he had really entered into their body and soul, and thereby into the view of the world that they incarnate. He sees everything through their eyes, articulating his experience in the terms they embody, as if the texture of their world has become that of his own subjectivity—as if he is possessed by them, transformed into these various manifestations of the dual godhead, one more mask for the divinities he divines everywhere.

In part, this metaleptic strategy follows from the liminal position appropriate to any author who understands himself as aspiring to occupy the orchestral position of the tragic chorus. For it enacts a provisional subversion of the supposedly absolute division between the spectator and the characters of Attic tragedy—as if Nietzsche is reenacting his experience of utter identification with those mythic figures in order to invite his reader not only to undergo that experience with him, but also to experience Nietzsche's own transfiguration of tragic mythic drama in a similar way (by thinking and acting as if one had really entered—by way of Nietzsche's ensouled body of choric writing—into the body and soul of Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus). But one might equally well view metalepsis not merely as a strategy adopted within the book but also as the basic principle of its construction. For if *BT* does invite an understanding of itself as structured overall in the terms it posits for understanding the structure of one phenomenon it analyzes, then that part of the book stands for (substitutes or goes proxy for, incarnates or exemplifies the living spirit of) the whole—an essentially metonymic effect.

Interlude: The Operatic Transfiguration of Voice, Body, and Words

I suggested earlier that another part of *BT* might have a metonymic function: the account offered in its concluding sections of Wagnerian opera. More specifically, my claim was that Nietzsche not only is as much concerned to illuminate Attic tragedy by reference to Wagner as to illuminate Wagner by reference to Attic tragedy, but also wants us to understand his own text in the terms provided by his analysis of both.

The mythic principle of genealogical substitution and displacement we have already encountered would suggest that Wagner's relation to Aeschylean drama is given in the metamorphosis of the term "orchestra," from naming the site of the chorus to that of the players of musical instruments. On Nietzsche's understanding, this linguistic displacement marks and effects both change and continuity, signifying a transfiguring recurrence or re-creation: the Wagnerian orchestra is a mask of the tragic chorus, which was itself a mask of the satyr chorus.

The envisaged architecture of Bayreuth emphasizes one central continuity by placing every seat in the audience at exactly the same level, thus echoing the

egalitarianism implicit in the encircling terraces of the original Greek theater. In both dispositions, matters of social distinction recede in the face of an essentially communal identification with the drama about to unfold—the expression of an existing or passionately desired sense of unity with one another, and with the truth dramatized on stage. The central discontinuity lies in the fact that the location whose liminality serves to effect this transcendence of individuation is occupied not by singing and dancing seers, and thus by words interwoven with music and action, but by makers of music alone. If the pairing of Attic tragedy and Wagnerian opera allows each to illuminate the other, this (un)masking tells us that music is the often-occluded essence of the phenomenon of Greek tragic drama, and that Wagner's way of rearticulating that aesthetic original nevertheless gives an unprecedented dominance to the role of music within the envisaged totality of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The key feature of music in this context—its Dionysian essence—has primarily to do with the fact that Nietzsche views it as imageless, essentially nonrepresentational. More precisely, the distinction between representation and that which is represented, between symbolic form and symbolic content, has no application to music: it refuses that mode of articulating and hence individuating its meaning, because it *is* its meaning, it means itself. Since its mode of signification is not that of semblance making, it is particularly suited to articulating the underlying truth of things, with which we and all existing things are ultimately one.

Viewing myth and music as each other's other allows Nietzsche to see that Wagner's most recent thoughts about opera—according to which music was ultimately more important than the words and deeds dramatized on stage—provide an unprecedentedly deep acknowledgment of the extent to which the womb-like Dionysian enchantment out of which the tragic chorus speaks is an essentially musical mood or mode of attunement. Since no one in Nietzsche's era (or indeed our own) was in a position to experience the musical element of the tragic chorus, his experience of Wagner's transfigured version of it was an indispensable means of disclosing its true significance. And to those who point out that, since Nietzsche had, at the time of composing *BT*, never experienced a Wagner opera in performance, and had probably only ever heard piano reductions of their scores, his sense of the priority of the musical element in such operatic work was, to say the least of it, potentially overdetermined, Nietzsche might reply that it was precisely his ecstatic apprehension of the unrealized totality of those works by means of an experience of their scores that confirmed him in his sense of the distinctive physiognomy of both Wagnerian opera and Attic tragedy. One might say that, just as the striking presence of the musical element in Wagnerian opera revealed to Nietzsche the nature and significance of the missing element in our experience of Attic tragedy, so the striking dramatic element of Attic tragedy helped to flesh out the nature and significance of the as-yet missing element in his experience of Wagnerian opera.

But the displacement of the ancient chorus by the modern symphonic orchestra invites the question: where is that chorus displaced to? In the context of opera, the answer must surely be: fully onto the stage—to the dramatized, lyrical words and deeds of the singers. And since this displacement reshapes the distinction between the chorus and the individual protagonists of these tragic mythological dramas, the original significance of the tragic chorus will inevitably be redistributed between those two kinds of dramatic-operatic being.

One possible implication of this redistribution emerges if we pair a remark of Nietzsche's with one from Stanley Cavell's discussion of opera. Nietzsche's remark comes from a scathing critique of the prevailing, non-Wagnerian forms of operatic work:

What will become of the Dionysiac and the Apolline where there is such a mixture of styles as I have shown to lie at the heart of the *stilo rappresentativo*?—where music is regarded as the servant and the libretto as master, where music is compared to the body and the words to the soul? (*BT* 19)

Cavell's discussion recasts Nietzsche's familiar metaphor of the body from a rather different perspective, that of a commentary on the conjunction of opera's founding with the advent of Cartesian skepticism in modern philosophy, during which he attempts to specify opera's distinctive conception of the relation between the human being and her body:

A relation in which not this character and this actor are embodied in each other, but in which this voice is located in—one might say disembodied within—this figure, this double, this person, this persona, this singer, whose voice is essentially unaffected by the role.

A Cartesian intuition of the absolute metaphysical difference between mind and body, together with the twin Cartesian intuition of an undefined intimacy between just this body and only this spirit, appears to describe conditions of the possibility of opera [. . .].

. . . surely the operatic voice is the grandest realization of having a signature, of an abandonment to your words, hence of your mortal immortality.³

Nietzsche wishes to revive the idea of music as the Dionysian soul and words as the Apolline body of Wagnerian opera; he thereby inverts the evaluative hierarchy written into the essentially representational style of current operatic forms, but leaves unquestioned the assumption that the relation between soul and body is inevitably both oppositional and hierarchical. Cavell transfigures the issue by considering the individual figure of the opera singer, and by viewing her as essentially individuated in that medium by her voice. Her voice is a manifestation or incarnation of her spirit or signature, rather than of her soul—or rather, the terms “spirit” and “signature” here substitute for or displace the term “soul,” retaining its function of referring to a person's essence or identity, but distancing themselves from the assumption that that essence is simply immortal, and

so essentially opposed to its body; for the opera singer's voice is enigmatically intimate with her body, hence her mode of immortality is distinctively mortal. And her voice both realizes and is realized by an abandonment to her words, not an abandonment of them; Cavell thereby rejects the idea that words are a mere vessel for or servant of the voice—hence essentially opposed to or other than it, and so the human being who voices them. What the opera singer's voice is truly dislocated from or disembodied within is neither her words nor her body, but rather (as Cavell's prose, with its rapid sequence of terms for it—each no sooner deployed than displaced—positively enacts) her persona or mask: that is, her role as an actor in lyric drama as such, and her specific character in this particular opera (whoever it may be). Her voice thereby reveals music and words as essentially unified aspects of the identity that survives any maskings or unmaskings it undergoes—a duality whose productive conflict and complementarity reveal an underlying individuality.

Looking back on *BT* fifteen years later, Nietzsche declares that its author, this new soul, stammering in a strange tongue, “ought to have sung [. . .] and not talked!” (*BT* “Attempt at Self-Criticism” 4). Cavell's transfiguration of one of that author's key figures in the light of one of his key points of metonymic reference suggests that this attempt at self-criticism is not so much an external critique as a deployment of that same strange tongue, only without the stammer. At the very least, it suggests that the guidance Nietzsche hesitantly wished to take from his impressions of Wagnerian opera will be found in the specific modulations of his authorial voice; and since its capacity for song must be more dependent upon language alone than any opera to which it adverts, its signature or spirit must be realized primarily in the specific mode of Nietzsche's abandonment to words, his willingness to be ecstatically possessed by *their* individual spirit or signature, their mortal immortality.

That mortal immortality is most generally realized in the genealogical vicissitudes of words from Aeschylus's days to Wagner's and now our own, that is, by the endlessly reconfigured orchestrations of their individual and collective histories to which *BT* is so obsessively attuned. And the specifically Wagnerian music of Nietzsche's voice is not audible outside or beside itself in opera, as if *BT* is an alternative libretto for *Tristan and Isolde*. It is rather realized in that text's becoming increasingly possessed by those libretti: for its concluding sections begin to deploy the register of Wagnerian myth in the metaleptic way in which it employs Aeschylean and Sophoclean myth throughout—shifting from citation (as in “the fire-magic of music” [from act 3 of *The Valkyrie*], or “the wide space of the world's night” [from act 3 of *Tristan*]) to straightforward use (as when describing the German yearning for the “blissfully enticing call of the Dionysiac bird which is on the wing, hovering above his head, and which wants to show him the way” (just like the forest bird in *Siegfried* that leads the hero to the rock on which Brünnhilde

is sleeping) (*BT* 20, 21, 23). Here, then, is a second way in which this book invites an understanding of itself in the terms it offers for an understanding of one specific phenomenon it aspires to comprehend—a second instance of structural metonymy.

Theoretical Man: Socrates as a Mask of Apollo

Even if one accepts *BT*'s analysis of Attic tragedy and Wagnerian opera as having such metonymic significance, however, there is one specific difference between the vision analyzed and the analytical vision. Whereas the tragic chorus discharges a spectacle of Dionysus alone, Nietzsche's dramatic, tragic myth of Western culture envisions a dual godhead, a conflictual partnership between Apollo and Dionysus as the primal ground of all things. This suggests that Nietzsche is as much a servant of Apollo as he is of Dionysus, or at least a worshipper of their union or pairing. After all, his more purely textual counterpoint to Aeschylean rebirth in Wagner cannot call upon music in any literal sense; it must draw more extensively and systematically upon the Apolline dimension of these creative drives. And Nietzsche's struggle to understand the enigmatic sublimity of Attic tragedy and Wagnerian opera is informed throughout by his inheritance of Schopenhauer and Kant, and so by an indebtedness (however troubled) to the tradition of philosophy. Phrased in mythic terms, this poses the question: how does the presence of both Apollo and Socrates inflect or transfigure the exemplary significance of Dionysus in the Nietzschean metaphysical vision of Western culture?

So formulated, this query makes a questionable assumption—that Apollo and Socrates are two essentially distinct figures in Nietzsche's dramatic mythology. This assumption might seem to be confirmed by Nietzsche's way of introducing Socrates to his narrative of Attic tragedy's suicidal embodiment in the work of Euripides: "In a certain sense Euripides, too, was merely a mask; the deity who spoke out of him was not Dionysus, nor Apollo, but an altogether newborn daemon called *Socrates*" (*BT* 12). But this remark will be misunderstood unless we take seriously the work of the words "daemon" and "mask" within it.

Talk of Socrates as a daemon is doubly metaleptic: it exploits Socrates's characterization of himself as possessed of an attendant or indwelling spirit in order to characterize the link between Euripides and Socrates, and it invokes a flavor of malignity now attending post-Christian uses of the term. But a "daemon" is, in this context, not straightforwardly identifiable with a divinity: in Greek mythology, a daemon was a being whose nature lay somewhere between that of gods and men, hence at best a divinity of an inferior kind. The term certainly doesn't make Socrates sound like a third among equals in Nietzsche's theology.

Might we then consider him instead as a mask of Apollo (and so consider Euripides in the same terms)? A masking relation allows for both continuity

and discontinuity: what lies beneath the mask is both distinguishable from the mask itself and yet its underlying truth. The suggestion is not that Socrates has no independent mythic significance at all; it is that this significance is ultimately to be understood as an inflection of that of Apollo—more specifically, an inflection of Apollo that aspires to repress or deny rather than to honor or even to accommodate Dionysus (in the manner that Nietzsche envisages Apollo making room for this foreign, barbarous deity upon his initial arrival on Attic shores, before their brief and passionate union in Attic tragedy). Socrates represents the aspect of Apollo that regrets that accommodation, that cannot comprehend why he entered into the marriage that resulted from it, and that desperately desires a divorce.

Nietzsche himself encapsulates Socrates's mythic significance as follows: he is the archetype of theoretical man. Theoretical man is optimistic, both morally and more generally. Morally, he believes that virtue is knowledge; sin is committed only out of ignorance; and the virtuous man is a happy man; in other words, being moral is simply a matter of implementing practical reason. In the theoretical domain, optimism is equally central: here, the key Socratic belief is that reason can not only grasp the uttermost depths of being but correct it (improve it, engender progress). Hence the mythical resonance of the dying Socrates, rendered immune to the fear of death by reason and knowledge; it declares that a fully comprehended individual life is the only justifiable one, but also that it is humanly available.

The moral and metaphysical content of this archetype utterly contradicts that of Oedipus or Antigone, those embodiments of the reality of moral luck and of the ultimate incomprehensibility of being. But from the Socratic perspective, nothing else should be expected from a medium and a genre that conflates illusion and reality, that addresses the chaotic and opaque energies of the emotions rather than the mind, and that gives itself over to inspiration rather than comprehensible bodies of creative principle. Theoretical man thus distinguishes art sharply from knowledge, as well as distinguishing within the realm of knowledge between science and metaphysics, which (as the name suggests) incorporates and goes beyond scientific knowledge, involving what one might call knowledge of knowledge. And as the various aspects of human engagement with reality are distinguished from one another, so a hierarchy of their value is simultaneously established, with art at the bottom and philosophy at the top.

From the perspective of the modern philosophical tradition (call it that of Kantian Enlightenment), Socratic theoretical optimism thus appears as a commitment to a multifaceted principle of autonomy. Its moral ideal for the individual is mirrored at the level of culture by a conception of its various dimensions as logically distinct and self-sufficient intellectual enterprises; at both levels, individual flourishing and fulfillment reside in a proper recognition of their autonomy in relation to their equally autonomous others.

Even this brief account suggests that the key connection between Socrates and Apollo lies in the former's hyperbolic incarnation of the latter's governing *principium individuationis*. The media of sculpture and dreams are Apolline because they are populated with sharply delineated human and divine figures, hence a kind of celebration of the individual; but the world of dream experience, so often hard to distinguish from that of real experience, more generally exhibits "the logical causality of line and outline, colour and grouping" (BT 2). For if subjective experience (whether real or illusory) is to convey or represent a world, two things are required. It must present a multiplicity of discriminable entities, entities that can be grouped or linked to one another in causal (or any other) relations only if they can be recognized as distinct, individual entities; and what is thereby represented must be distinguishable from its representation—that is, the individual subject of the experience must be distinguishable from its objects (and of course from other subjects of experience). Genuinely cognitive representation must balance the competing demands of identity and relation, multiplicity and oneness: objects can make a world (as opposed to a chaos or plenum) only if they stand in relations with one another, and individuals can recognize themselves as such only in relation to a world of independently existing objects with which to contrast the course of their subjective experience.

I have phrased these claims about individuation in Kantian terms precisely because Nietzsche himself is necessarily interpreting the genealogical development of theoretical man in the terms bequeathed to him from Kant via Schopenhauer. But of course, Nietzsche also reads Kant as the first philosopher to disclose the delusion at the heart of the Socratic inflection of this Apolline principle.

Whereas this optimism once believed in our ability to grasp and solve [. . .] all the puzzles of the universe, and treated space, time and causality as entirely unconditional laws of the most general validity, Kant showed that these things actually only served to raise mere appearance, the work of maya, to the status of the sole and supreme reality and to put this in the place of the innermost and true essence of things, thereby making it impossible really to understand this essence—to put the dreamer even more deeply to sleep [. . .]. (BT 18)

On this reading, the Socratic project is given a tragic inflection by a philosopher whose aim was to further or complete it. The critique of pure reason employs the very tools of the understanding that Socrates held to be capable of grasping the whole of reality; but when applied to the understanding itself (as they must be, given that human understanding is part of reality), they reveal it to be essentially limited, conditioned, and unsatisfiable. For Kant's Transcendental Analytic grounds the very possibility of knowledge about reality by showing that the mind's basic categories necessarily apply to the world of our experience; but it does so only on the assumption that we first receive something for those categories to synthesize—a body of intuition from whose marriage with

the mind's activity a world will emerge, but whose brute givenness points to a reality that lies *ex hypothesis* beyond our categorical grasp: call it the realm of things-in-themselves. At these limits, therefore (one might think of them as the threshold of modernity), Socratic logic finally curls up around itself and bites its own tail. Kant stands for an embryonic form of tragic knowledge about knowledge—a mournful vision of the necessary disappointment to which all theoretical optimism is fated.

His work thus reveals the groundlessness of the Socratic privileging of metaphysics. To be sure that such knowledge is to be valued above all other modes of human engagement with reality, we must be sure that it is (however partial or incomplete in fact) completable in principle—that is, capable of grasping the whole of reality. But our best attempt to achieve that certainty—to show that reality and our cognitive powers really are as if made for one another—in fact forces us to acknowledge the enigmatic existence of an aspect of reality that necessarily transcends those powers. But if we cannot coherently think of theoretical knowledge as total, then we cannot justifiably devalue artistic modes of engagement with reality by comparison with it. In this way, the Socratic project finds itself acknowledging in its own metaphysical terms the very thing that it originally criticized Attic tragedy for endorsing (and would certainly criticize Wagnerian opera for recovering) in its distinctive terms—the Dionysian idea that no account of reality is complete that does not acknowledge both its underlying affinity with and its inherent transcendence of the human capacity to make sense of it.

To subvert the Socratic inflection of metaphysics is thus not to condemn the metaphysical enterprise as such: on the contrary, the Kantian transfiguration or unmasking of Socratic metaphysics makes possible a mode of metaphysical thinking that is no less insightful or valuable than other forms of human engagement with reality, because it too acknowledges the essential complementarity of Apollo and Dionysus. But in thereby locating Kant's achievement as one episode in a genealogical story that pivots upon dramatic and operatic stagings of the intimate strife between Apollo and Dionysus, Nietzsche does mean to put in question the Socratic perception of an absolute distinction between metaphysics and every other mode of human culture, and in particular between metaphysics and art. The point is not to counterclaim (in the same absolutizing spirit) that there is absolutely no difference between these ways of engaging with reality. The point is rather to affirm their internal relatedness—not only by confirming Nietzsche's perception of a metaphysical dimension in Attic tragedy and Wagnerian opera, but also by inviting us to perceive the dramatic and mythological dimensions of Kantian metaphysics.

Seen through the lens of Attic tragedy, Kant's fundamental duality of concept and intuition, theoretical form and sensory content, appears as an epistemological restaging of the underlying structure of a tragic drama. The dark Dionysian

womb of givenness engenders a sublime marriage of concept and intuition that discloses the world and the knowing subject as if made for one another, thereby presenting itself as if given for just such a purpose, as if fated to discharge itself in the Apolline synthetic activity it suffers; and that synthetic activity's attempts to grasp its own nature inexorably engender an intuition of a realm necessarily beyond its own grasp, an undifferentiable, Dionysian reality from which it first emerged and toward which it endlessly, impossibly aspires. And it is to this tantalizing intuition of a unity underlying Kant's apparently binary critical system that post-Kantian philosophers from Fichte through Hegel to Schopenhauer are each, in their differing ways, responsive.

What Nietzsche also detects in the apparently abstract content of Kant's texts is the transposition into a cognitive key of the utterly primordial mythic theme of individuation as a fate or condition to which we are condemned, and condemned to deny. For Kant's vision of us as finite knowers stages a crucifixion scene—portraying us as crucified by the burden of understanding (our conditioned capacity for cognizing reality necessarily sundering us from the world and our fellow knowers of it) and as in turn crucifying that understanding (for according to the Transcendental Dialectic, human reason has an ineradicable tendency to construct ideas of total or unconditioned knowledge, and to present them to the understanding as attainable ideals rather than purely regulative incitements to endless incremental improvements in knowledge). And if this fantasy of overcoming our limits is no less a part of our rational nature than the limits themselves, then the process of succumbing to, overcoming, and then succumbing once again to that impulse to transcend our finitude promises to be unending.

As if to confirm this, Kant's own depiction of this primordial oscillation between the acceptance and rejection of finitude itself exemplifies it. On the one hand, his account of knowledge as finite or conditioned presents itself as giving us an assurance that we can have genuine knowledge of the way things are, and indeed of anything and everything knowable. On the other hand, in doing so, he projects a distinction between things as they appear to us and things in themselves, assigning the latter to a domain beyond our grasp; and he also projects an origin for the content of our concepts that precedes any of the distinctions imposed by the synthetic activity of the mind. In other words, Kant finds himself invoking a conception of reality as essentially beyond our grasp, to which the discriminations that supposedly make knowledge possible do not apply; and in so doing, he violates the very limits of knowledge that these invocations are intended to support—thereby succumbing to the very same tendency to deny our finitude that he wants to correct.

Can Nietzsche, unlike Kant, find a way of acknowledging the reality of that transgressive impulse and its intuition of beyondness, but without succumbing to it? Or must we see his deployment of the mythical duality of Apollo and Dionysus as just such a transgression, insofar as the figure of Dionysus

appears to represent what—on Nietzsche’s own Kantian and Schopenhauerian understanding—must be essentially beyond our representational grasp? If we are to understand Nietzsche’s metaphysical vision at all, we cannot make do with Apollo alone (that way Socratic imbalance lies)—the reality and significance of Dionysus must be conveyed, and so must be represented, somehow; but any representation of him seems fated—simply by virtue of being a representation of the unrepresentable—to betray the insight it purports to convey.

There is, however, a difference between unwittingly betraying one’s own insight, and a dramatic staging of that inevitable betrayal (one whose very theatricality is intended to invite acknowledgment of its nature). By recasting Schopenhauer’s metaphysical vision of the world as will and representation (itself a recasting of Kant’s vision of knowledge as a cursed marriage of concepts and intuitions) as a mythic drama of Apollo and Dionysus, Nietzsche underlines the nonliteral status of his own discourse, and thereby problematizes the relation between such hyperbolically fictional figures and the reality they purportedly represent. He then reinforces the point by multiplying the ways in which Dionysus appears in his genealogical narrative—as if disarticulating or dismembering him: the god has so many different manifestations in *BT* that no particular one (whether religious, artistic, or metaphysical) can be taken as truly representing him. Rather, each is presented as one of his masks, and thus invites the inference that even this re-membering or re-presentation (construed as an attempt to identify what lies behind them all) can amount to only the construction of one more mask—one more inevitable failure to grasp the god himself. The book is, one might say, a mask composed of masks, or perhaps a masque of masks, the nature of whose constituent elements declares its own necessary distance from its object.

Dionysus is thus not one element in a Nietzschean master narrative of Western culture presenting the work of Aeschylus, Wagner, Kant, and endless others as mere symptoms or instances of an underlying duality that has at last been captured in *BT*. Dionysus is primarily present in the elusive, dissonant rhythm or pulse—at once synchronic and diachronic—orchestrated by Nietzsche’s animated collage or frieze of various attempts to represent him (and to deny him). Each is thereby disclosed as at once similar to and yet different from every other, both individual and typical, with strengths and limitations all of its own; hence each makes an indispensable contribution to the overall display, but neither any individual element nor some conjunction of them—not even their reincorporation into the larger representation that is *BT*—can constitute a complete or total image of Dionysus. It is rather in the book’s ragged edges and internal seams, its overt refusal to cohere as a single, totalizing representation and its openness to further insertions or extensions (a Frankenstein’s monster of ecstatic scholarship), that its real attempt to present the god of the unrepresentable is to be found.

One might regard this as an attempt to acknowledge the centrality of the principle of individuation in any human attempt to grasp the essence of reality (given the inevitably structured, differentiating, and individuating nature of representation), while denying its absoluteness or self-sufficiency. The duality of Nietzsche's godhead is thus not so much the introduction of another deity into Apollo's temple, but rather an attempt to worship Apollo nonidolatrously—to acknowledge that we can grasp reality only in terms of some particular way of organizing it, but that any such way could never fuse with the reality it represents, and will inevitably be limited or conditioned by its organizing principles. So we cannot avoid committing ourselves to some such representation (or mode of representation); but we can allow that commitment to be informed by the awareness that—being possessed of limits—it will be open to supplementation, contestation, and displacement by other representations, each of which will itself be vulnerable to the same process of overcoming. And Dionysus does not lie behind any or all of these visions, but is rather dispersed between them—manifest in the recurring impulse to re-member him that generates such endlessly shifting family resemblances.

BT certainly questions the absoluteness of any principles of individuation at the disciplinary or cultural level, while acknowledging their necessity in some form or other. For its multiple metonymic structure problematizes prevailing conceptions of the distinctions between different art forms, between art and philosophy, and between art, politics, religion, science, and philosophy. A form of philosophical writing that thinks of itself as internally related to both Attic tragedy and Wagnerian opera, and of both these art forms as themselves internally related (as masks, displacements, or transfigurations of one another), does not deny the differences between art and philosophy. It rather questions the prevailing ways of characterizing and evaluating those differences, and suggests rather different terms in which to conceive them. It thereby invites the culture as a whole to rethink the way in which it has conceived of metaphysics, art, politics, and religion as essentially autonomous enterprises, but again without denying their differences or suggesting that they should be regarded as an undifferentiated whole.

So Nietzsche doesn't dismiss his inheritance of metaphysical aspirations or responsibilities; he rather suggests that they be shouldered in different ways, even by philosophers, and in particular that the metaphysical project can only benefit from exploiting the fullest possible range of representational modes, while acknowledging the fatedness of any representational project, even a philosophical *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to partiality (call it particularity of perspective). This is why he presents his own metaphysical vision as the present culmination of the long genealogical narrative that is its dramatic content, a narrative in which prior visions endlessly engender variously inflected displacements or transfigurations of themselves, only to be transfigured in their turn.

BT is thus both a narrative of and one more narrative in an unending sequence of self-overcoming narratives, each revising the limits of its predecessors before being

in turn revised, but all thereby amounting to versions of the same vision of human reality as a matter of endlessly constructing, transgressing, and reconstructing the limits of our present representations of reality. Nietzsche thereby declares the natality of his own vision (its otherness to absolute originality or self-origination), and foretells its future overcoming; and by thus indicating the conditions and limitations of his own work, as if underling the inevitable failure of its inevitably Apolline endeavor, he hopes to conjure the absent presence of Dionysus.

This suggests an interpretation of the genealogical sequence of texts that makes up Nietzsche's own body of writing. We might see each as a new mask of its author—one formed by critically evaluating its predecessor (call it a process of unmasking), which necessarily results in a new mask or remasking, one that exceeds or transgresses the form or structure of its predecessor without ever distinguishing itself absolutely from it. In this sense, Nietzsche's texts that follow *BT* might be thought of as a sequence of displacements or transfigurations of its tragic, dramatic myth of Western culture; so that, for example, one might wish to explore the dialectic of slave and master in *GM* as a mask of the original duality of Apollo and Dionysus—each a metonym of the individual text that activates it and of the process of transition from each such text to the next in the unfolding sequence of Nietzsche's writing life (their mode of textual becoming).

And this line of thought further suggests that the conflictual complementarity of Apollo and Dionysus might be thought of as Nietzsche's first attempt to represent the dynamics of self-identity as a process of endless self-overcoming. From this perspective (call it perfectionist), Apollo stands for the self's need for individuation, for a stable outline or provisional structure of values and affects, and Dionysus stands for the self's impulse endlessly to overcome any such structure, even if necessarily in the name of another, as-yet only prophetically grasped, restructuring of itself. And if this is a point of view on *BT* that becomes available only much later in the unfolding unmaskings and remaskings of the text by its author, and so amounts to a critical reconstruction or re-membering of it, then that is exactly what, from the point of view at issue, one would expect.

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NOTES

1. *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
2. For a much longer list of examples, see M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 189–204.
3. Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 137, 144.