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Art and the body in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*

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In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche argues that science conquers art, especially the tragic art of the Dionysian poet of ancient Greece. This paper explores Nietzsche's understanding of the unique materialism of Dionysian tragedy by considering his reflections on the origins of tragedy in the tragic chorus. It then turns to the Dionysian confrontation with science or the mind of philosophy. Nietzsche claims that the Greek tragedian embraces life in all its pain by indulging in the 'craving for the ugly' (BT 21).¹ Embodied by the satyr chorus as the physical image of Dionysus, the 'ugly' is understood to be the animal passions of human beings, specifically their sexual drives. Appealing to the natural, primeval self that is suppressed but not extinguished by the knowledge of culture, Dionysian tragedy gets us in touch with our bodies

and its deepest longings. Tragedy, strictly speaking, invites us to *feel* the presence of the god and not simply to see or hear him.

Nietzsche argues that tragedy is opposed and eventually destroyed by science.² Associated with the ‘Socratism’ of the theoretical man, the response of science, or philosophy, to pain, is quite different from the response of tragedy (*BT* 18).³ Craving the ‘beautiful’ rather than the ugly, science and philosophy celebrate the human mind and the rationality of the universe (*BT* 21). Although Plato, according to Nietzsche, preserves the tragic art form in his dialogues, it is Euripides, another student of Socrates, who destroys the Dionysian entirely. Euripides destroyed Greek tragedy by bringing the *demos* along with their everyday reality onto the stage. By doing so he brought the human individual separated from their god into view. Nietzsche suggests that Euripides celebrated the unadorned individual because only the individual is intelligible or accessible to reason; he wanted art to be comprehended by mind or that it be rationally understood. Euripides was possessed of such a rationalizing drive, Nietzsche claims, because his primary audience was Socrates. It is Socrates, therefore, who is the true opponent of Dionysus.

Tragedy as chorus and the body

Nietzsche turns to the origin of Greek tragedy in section 7 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and locates the earliest manifestation of tragedy in the tragic chorus.⁴ He denies, however, that the chorus has a socio-political role, representing the people of democratic Athens viewing the aristocratic scenes on stage (*BT* 56). Rather, the origins of the tragic chorus, according to Nietzsche, are purely religious (*BT* 56). To understand the religious origins of the tragic chorus, and thus of tragedy as such, we must first investigate the role that the chorus played in tragic drama.

The tragic chorus, according to Nietzsche, is a group of actors usually portrayed as satyrs, the half-man half-goat image of the god Dionysus (*BT* 21, 59). The chorus is usually not on stage itself but at points in the drama will respond to the actors who are or speak directly to the audience in their seats. The chorus is thus both inside the play, when it interacts with the actors on stage, and outside the play when it speaks with the viewing audience. Nietzsche, appearing to accept Schiller's interpretation of the role of the tragic chorus, suggests that the chorus is a 'living wall that tragedy constructs around itself in order to preserve its ideal domain and its poetical freedom' (*BT* 58). The chorus, in other words, ensures that the audience views art as art rather than reality. Through the action of the chorus, the audience is reminded that the scene in front of them is fictitious and not real.

In modern drama a similar situation occurs when an actor breaks the dramatic illusion, walks forth and speaks to the audience in his or her own voice. When this happens, we know that we are only watching a play and that the characters, as opposed to the persons, on stage are not real. The chorus, therefore, like the actor in modern drama who breaks the dramatic illusion, divides the world of reality, represented by the audience, from the world of fiction on stage. The chorus separates or divides the audience from the drama in two ways. First, when the chorus speaks to the audience it separates the audience psychically or intellectually; it allows the audience to see art as art or the drama as fiction rather than reality. Second, when the chorus interacts with the actors on stage it separates the audience physically; the audience is excluded from the drama being played out between chorus and actors.

After apparently accepting Schiller's interpretation of the role of the tragic chorus, Nietzsche raises a major problem with it. According to Nietzsche, '*tragedy arose from the tragic chorus, and was originally only chorus and nothing but chorus*' (*BT* 56). In the earliest stages of

tragedy, therefore, the chorus *was* the actors or drama on stage, as only the chorus was present. Even the god Dionysus himself, of whom the satyr chorus is an image, was not present or visible, according to Nietzsche, in the oldest period of tragedy (*BT 66*). The significance of the fact that in the earliest form of tragic art only the chorus was present is that the audience is to the chorus what the chorus will be to the actors on stage in later tragedy. According to Nietzsche, the logic of this primitive relation is as follows:

The tragic chorus of the Greeks is forced to recognize real beings in the figures on stage. The chorus of the Oceanides really believes that it sees before it the Titan Prometheus, and it considers itself as real as the god of the scene. But could the highest and purest type of spectator regard Prometheus as bodily present and real, as the Oceanides do? Is it characteristic of the ideal spectator to run onto the stage and free the god from his torments? (*BT 57*).

Nietzsche suggests that the psychic and physical separation between audience and art maintained by the chorus in later tragedy is absent in earlier tragedy when the actors on stage have not appeared and all that is present is audience and chorus. In such a situation, Nietzsche implies, the audience fails to see art as art or cannot without difficulty distinguish between what is real and what is fictitious. The psychic separation is absent as art becomes life and life becomes art when the spectator, running on to the stage to free their god from torment, becomes part of the scene. Not only is the psychic separation between audience and drama absent with the sole presence of the chorus, but the physical separation is absent as well. According to Nietzsche,

‘this process of the tragic chorus is the *dramatic* proto-phenomenon: to see oneself transformed before one’s own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another body, another character. This process stands at the beginning of the origin of drama’ (BT 64). As the audience experiences ecstatic union with the chorus, they ‘surrender their individuality’, as Nietzsche characterizes it, and enter into and become another character, namely their god (BT 64). The significance, therefore, of the sole presence of the chorus at the origin of tragedy is that it encourages the unity of the audience with art, the spectator with the drama.

The audience of early tragedy could only unite physically with the chorus, however, or enter into another body, as it were, in a metaphorical way. What is really happening is that the audience see, or more likely feel, themselves in the chorus of satyrs. Thus, according to Nietzsche, ‘we may call the chorus in its primitive form [...] the mirror image in which the Dionysian man contemplates himself [...] The satyr chorus is [...] a vision of the Dionysian mass of spectators’ (BT 63). Tragedy as chorus, therefore, is self-reflective; the presence of the satyr chorus allows the spectators to become an object to themselves both individually and collectively. That part of the self that the audience reflects on or feels when they imagine themselves united with the satyr chorus is the natural, primeval self that is suppressed but not extinguished by the culture of civilized life (BT 59).

Nietzsche gives content to this primeval nature that lies hidden beneath and is constrained by civilized life when he describes the satyr as one who ‘proclaims wisdom from the very heart of nature, a symbol of the sexual omnipotence of nature which the Greeks used to contemplate with reverent wonder’ (BT 61). As a symbol of the sexual omnipotence of nature in contrast to the ‘knowledge [...] of culture’, the uncivilized, natural self that the satyr brings before and gets the audience to feel is their sexual nature. Nietzsche, it seems, associates our experience of

tragedy with the arousal of the sexual passions. Thus, whereas civilization appears grounded in rationality and the mind, tragic art, or the Dionysian, appears to arise from nature understood as sexuality and the body.⁵ Tragedy, Nietzsche suggests, gets civilized and cultured human beings in touch with their bodies and its deepest longings, longings which have been constrained but not extinguished by the socio-political structures within which they live.⁶

After uncovering the Dionysian origins of tragedy Nietzsche turns to the rise of what he calls the 'Apollinian' aspect of tragedy. The Apollinian refers to the actual appearance, via an actor, of the god Dionysus on stage with dialogue (*BT* 67, 73). Thus, whereas in the Dionysian aspect of tragedy the god is *felt*, with the Apollinian aspect of tragedy the god is seen and heard (*BT* 66-67). The Apollinian is the direct visual and verbal presence of the god Dionysus himself, who, Nietzsche claims, was the first character to appear on stage when tragedy developed beyond the tragic chorus (*BT* 73). Moreover, as Dionysus was the first character of Greek tragedy, its sole theme for a long time was the 'sufferings of Dionysus' (*BT* 73). Yet, it is reasonable to ask: why is Dionysus suffering? Why is a god in pain? In other words, why is Dionysus associated with tragedy rather than comedy or epic?

The cosmos and the suffering god

Nietzsche argues that Dionysus is the suffering god because the existence of an intelligible universe means that he is a dismembered god. Nietzsche gives clarity to what is meant by Dionysus as the dismembered god when he says:

In truth [...] the hero [of tragedy] is the suffering Dionysus
of the Mysteries, the god experiencing in himself the
agonies of individuation, of whom wonderful myths tell
that as a boy he was torn to pieces by the Titans and now

is worshipped in this state as Zagreus. Thus it is intimated that this dismemberment, the properly Dionysian *suffering*, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, that we are therefore to regard the state of individuation as the origin and primal cause of all suffering, as something objectionable in itself. From the smile of this Dionysus sprang the Olympian gods, from his tears sprang man. In this existence as a dismembered god, Dionysus possesses the dual nature of a cruel, barbarized demon and a mild, gentle ruler' (*BT 73*).

Nietzsche indicates that according to Greek myth the process of the god's dismemberment—the separation or individuation of his being—is the creation of the universe. The image that Nietzsche draws is that before the cosmos comes into being, what exists is unified, undifferentiated matter. This undifferentiated mass of matter can be understood as the god Dionysus in his original condition. The god, however, is then torn to pieces or individuated, as Nietzsche would say, which can be understood as the process of creation. After this creative action, there exist a number of particular and therefore intelligible beings in the cosmos, such as Olympian gods, human beings, animals, plants, and the elements earth, air, fire and water. All of these particular pieces of the whole are actually the body of Dionysus separated or alienated from itself. The suffering of Dionysus, therefore, is caused by his dismemberment, which is also the Greek story of the coming into being and continuation of an intelligible universe.

In relation to sexuality—the presence of the suffering Dionysus in us—our bodily longing for union with another body seems to reflect our longing for the original unity of matter

that we believe existed before our world came into being. Thus, in our ecstatic desire to free Dionysus from his sufferings we reflect our deepest wish to return into an undifferentiated material being prior to the creation of the cosmos.⁷ The ultimate but unachievable aim of sexuality, therefore, seems to be the fusing of our material existence into matter as a whole, such that all matter or body would come together in a way that would destroy our world. In this sense sexuality desires to transcend all limits or boundaries, not just moral boundaries but also physical-factual boundaries. Thus, Nietzsche says of the rapture of the Dionysian state that it is the ‘annihilation of ordinary bounds and limits of existence’ (BT 59). Sexuality, in other words, points to the desire to crush together all individuated matter, such that human is fused into human, humanity into trees, trees into earth, and so on, until we are left without form and shape in one undifferentiated mass of material. In such a state the cosmos would be unintelligible as matter can only be grasped by thought when it is individuated into particular shapes. Intrinsic in our experience of sexuality, therefore, is pain at and perhaps even rebellion against an intelligible universe. One might be tempted to say that for Nietzsche, sexuality is inherently anti-rational.

The mind and the death of tragedy

Greek tragedy, Nietzsche argues, is confronted by and eventually dies under the glare of the ‘Socratism [...] of the theoretical man’ (BT 18). Euripides, a student of Socrates and himself a tragic poet, is crucial, according to Nietzsche, to the disappearance of the Dionysian.

The problem with Euripides is that he ‘brought the *spectator* onto the stage’ (BT 77). Provisionally, Nietzsche means that Euripides portrayed the *demos*, or the common ‘everyday man’ with his common, everyday reality, in the drama. Penetrating more deeply into Euripides’ tendencies Nietzsche claims that he finds two additional ‘spectators’ brought on to the tragic stage. The first of these is ‘Euripides himself, [but] Euripides as *thinker*, not as poet’ (BT 80).

Nietzsche suggests that Euripides, using his mind as a thinker rather than his passions as a poet, puts the human individual as an individuated piece of matter which speaks, or has *logos*, onto to the stage. This individual is separated and completely cut off from its god, which is the universal, undifferentiated matter that the tragic hero was a 'mask' for in earlier tragedy. In Euripides, the tragic hero represents an individual human being as an individual human being, and nothing deeper. In other words, the Euripidean tragic hero is completely Apollinian without any connection to the Dionysian from which the Apollinian originated.

Euripides puts this solely Apollinian individual at the center of his drama because, according to Nietzsche, he insisted that art be rationally comprehended by *nous*, or the intellect (*BT* 85). He therefore celebrates the unadorned individual because only the individual is accessible to reason. Since there are no 'ideas' in the Platonic sense for Euripides, it is only individuated pieces of matter with *logos* which can be thought or comprehended. The undifferentiated matter of Dionysus, or the primeval chaos that exists prior to *nous*, is completely unintelligible; it cannot be thought but only felt through sexuality.

Euripides desired to make tragedy completely rational, thereby causing its demise, because Socrates was the second of the two additional spectators brought to bear on the tragic stage by Euripides (*BT* 86). Because it is as a follower of Socrates that Euripides banishes the Dionysian from the tragic stage, Nietzsche claims that is Socrates who is the true opponent of Dionysus.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, Walter Kaufmann trans. (New York: Vintage, 1967). All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition.

² Laurence Lampert denies that as an advocate of art Nietzsche was an enemy of science. Rather, Lampert argues that Nietzsche's philosophy advances a science that breaks with both the Platonic science of the transcendence of nature and the Baconian science of the mastery of nature to embrace what Lampert calls a science of 'pure immanentism or naturalism' that is wholly consistent with the naturalistic worldview of contemporary biology and ecology. See Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: a Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 10-11.

³ Also see Aristide Tessitore, "Nietzsche or Socrates: Reflections on European Identity," ed. Ann Ward (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 196-97; but see Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 127.

⁴ For an alternative approach that denies that the origins or the primitive manifestations of the Dionysian captures its essence, see Benjamin Bennett, "Nietzsche's Idea of Myth: The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics," *PMLA* 94/3 (1979): 420-22.

⁵ See Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche," *New Literary History* 35/1 (2004): 92; also see Giacomo Gambino, "Nietzsche and the Greeks: Identity, Politics and Tragedy," *Polity* 28/4 (1996): 416, 428.

⁶ Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall suggest that Nietzsche's embrace of the Dionysian and the importance he places on the body open promising avenues for feminist philosophy. See Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall, "Why Feminists Read Nietzsche," in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 3-4. For a similar argument that suggests that Nietzsche's Dionysus is feminine, see Sarah Kofman, "Baubo: Theological Perversion and Fetishism," in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall

(University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 44-46. For alternative readings that question Nietzsche's value for feminist philosophy and egalitarian politics, see Ofelia Schutte (1998), "Nietzsche's Politics," in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 294-99, and David Owen, "Nietzsche's Squandered Seductions: Feminism, the Body, and the Politics of Genealogy," in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 321-23.

⁷ See Lampert for Nietzsche's embrace of the earth and the transience of all being. Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times*, 11-12. Also see Ingrid Makus, "Nietzsche's Criticism of Socratic Reason and the Problem of Identity," in *Socrates: Reason or Unreason as the Foundation of European Identity*, ed. Ann Ward (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 212.