

The Birth of Tragedy

Friedrich Nietzsche (1871)

This translation by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC

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We will have achieved much for the study of aesthetics when we come, not merely to a logical understanding, but also to the immediately certain apprehension of the fact that the further development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, just as reproduction depends upon the duality of the sexes, their continuing strife and only periodically occurring reconciliation. We take these names from the Greeks who gave a clear voice to the profound secret teachings of their contemplative art, not in ideas, but in the powerfully clear forms of their divine world.

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

In order to get closer to these two instinctual drives, let us think of them next as the separate artistic worlds of dreams and of intoxication, physiological phenomena between which we can observe an opposition corresponding to the one between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

According to the ideas of Lucretius, the marvelous divine shapes first appeared to the mind of man in a dream. It was in a dream that the great artist saw the delightful anatomy of superhuman existence, and the Hellenic poet, questioned about the secrets of poetic creativity, would have recalled his dreams and given an explanation exactly similar to the one Hans Sachs provides in *Die Meistersinger*.

My friend, that is precisely the poet's work—_To figure out his dreams, mark them down. Believe me, the truest illusion of mankind_Is revealed to him in dreams: _All poetic art and poeticizing_Is nothing but interpreting true dreams.

The beautiful appearance of the world of dreams, in whose creation each man is a complete artist, is the condition of all plastic art, indeed, as we shall see, an important half of poetry. We enjoy the form with an immediate understanding, all shapes speak to us, nothing is indifferent and unnecessary.

For all the very intense life of these dream realities, we nevertheless have the thoroughly disagreeable

sense of their illusory quality. At least that is my experience. For their frequency, even normality, I can point to many witnesses and the utterances of poets. Even the philosophical man has the presentiment that this reality in which we live and have our being is an illusion, that under it lies hidden a second quite different reality. And Schopenhauer specifically designates as the trademark of philosophical talent the ability to recognize at certain times that human beings and all things are mere phantoms or dream pictures.

Now, just as the philosopher behaves in relation to the reality of existence, so the artistically excitable man behaves in relation to the reality of dreams. He looks at them precisely and with pleasure, for from these pictures he fashions his interpretation of life; from these events he rehearses his life. This is not merely a case of agreeable and friendly images which he experiences with a complete understanding. They also include what is serious, cloudy, sad, dark, sudden scruples, teasing accidents, nervous expectations, in short, the entire “divine comedy” of life, including the Inferno—all this moves past him, not just like a shadow play, for he lives and suffers in the midst of these scenes, yet not without that fleeting sensation of illusion. And perhaps several people remember, like me, amid the dangers and terrors of a dream, successfully cheering themselves up by shouting: “It is a dream! I want to dream it some more!” I have also heard accounts of some people who had the ability to set out the causal connection of one and the same dream over three or more consecutive nights. These facts are clear evidence showing that our innermost beings, the secret underground in all of us, experiences its dreams with deep enjoyment, as a delightful necessity.

The Greeks expressed this joyful necessity of the dream experience in their god Apollo, who, as god of all the plastic arts, is at the same time the god of prophecy. In accordance with the root meaning of his association with brightness, he is the god of light. He also rules over the beautiful appearance of the inner fantasy world. The higher truth, the perfection of this condition in contrast to the sketchy understanding of our daily reality, as well as the deep consciousness of a healing and helping nature in sleep and dreaming, is the symbolic analogy to the capacity to prophesy the truth, as well as to art in general, through which life is made possible and worth living. But also that delicate line which the dream image may not cross so as to work its effect pathologically (otherwise the illusion would deceive us as crude reality)—that line must not be absent from the image of Apollo, that boundary of moderation, that freedom from more ecstatic excitement, that fully calm wisdom of the god of images. His eye must be sun-like, in keeping with his origin. Even when he is angry and gazes with displeasure, the consecration of the beautiful illusion rests on him.

And so one may verify (in an eccentric way) what Schopenhauer says of the man trapped in the veil of Maja: “As on the stormy sea which extends without limit on all sides, howling mountainous waves rise up and sink and a sailor sits in a row boat, trusting the weak craft, so, in the midst of a world of torments, the solitary man sits peacefully, supported by and trusting in the *principium individuationis* [the principle of individuality]” (*World as Will and Idea*, Vol. I, p. 416). Yes, we could say of Apollo that the imperturbable trust in that principle and the calm sitting still of the man conscious of it attained its loftiest expression in him, and we may even designate Apollo himself as the marvelous divine image of the *principium individuationis*, from whose gestures and gaze all the joy and wisdom of illusion, together with its beauty, speak to us.

In the same place Schopenhauer also described for us the monstrous horror which seizes a man when he suddenly doubts his ways of comprehending illusion, when the sense of a foundation, in any one

of its forms, appears to suffer a breakdown. If we add to this horror the ecstatic rapture, which rises up out of the same collapse of the *principium individuationis* from the innermost depths of human beings, yes, from the innermost depths of nature, then we have a glimpse into the essence of the Dionysian, which is presented to us most closely through the analogy to intoxication.

Either through the influence of narcotic drink, of which all primitive men and peoples speak, or through the powerful coming on of spring, which drives joyfully through all of nature, that Dionysian excitement arises. As its power increases, the subjective fades into complete forgetfulness of self. In the German Middle Ages under the same power of Dionysus constantly growing hordes waltzed from place to place, singing and dancing. In that St. John's and St. Vitus's dancing we recognize the Bacchic chorus of the Greeks once again, and its precursors in Asia Minor, right back to Babylon and the orgiastic Sacaia [*a riotous Babylonian festival*].

There are men who, from a lack of experience or out of apathy, turn mockingly away from such phenomena as from a "sickness of the people," with a sense of their own health and filled with pity. These poor people naturally do not have any sense of how deathly and ghost-like this very "Health" of theirs sounds, when the glowing life of the Dionysian throng roars past them. Under the magic of the Dionysian, not only does the bond between man and man lock itself in place once more, but also nature itself, now matter how alienated, hostile, or subjugated, rejoices again in her festival of reconciliation with her prodigal son, man. The earth freely offers up her gifts, and the beasts of prey from the rocks and the desert approach in peace. The wagon of Dionysus is covered with flowers and wreaths. Under his yolk stride panthers and tigers.

If someone were to transform Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* into a painting and not restrain his imagination when millions of people sink dramatically into the dust, then we could come close to the Dionysian. Now is the slave a free man, now all the stiff, hostile barriers break apart, those things which necessity and arbitrary power or "saucy fashion" have established between men. Now, with the gospel of world harmony, every man feels himself not only united with his neighbour, reconciled and fused together, but also as if the veil of Maja has been ripped apart, with only scraps fluttering around before the mysterious original unity. Singing and dancing, man expresses himself as a member of a higher unity. He has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the verge of flying up into the air as he dances. The enchantment speaks out in his gestures. Just as the animals speak and the earth gives milk and honey, so now something supernatural echoes out of him. He feels himself a god. He now moves in a lofty ecstasy, as he saw the gods move in his dream. The man is no longer an artist. He has become a work of art. The artistic power of all of nature, the rhapsodic satisfaction of the primordial unity, reveals itself here in the intoxicated performance. The finest clay, the most expensive marble—man—is here worked and chiseled, and the cry of the Eleusianian mysteries rings out to the chisel blows of the Dionysian world artist: "Do you fall down, you millions? World, do you have a sense of your creator?"

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It is an incontestable tradition that Greek tragedy in its oldest form had as its subject only the suffering of Dionysus and that for a long time later the individually present stage heroes were only Dionysus. But with the same certainty we can assert that right up to the time of Euripides Dionysus never ceased being the tragic hero, that all the famous figures of the Greek theatre, like Prometheus, Oedipus, and

so on, are only masks of that primordial hero Dionysus. The fact that behind all these masks stands a divinity, that is the fundamental reason for the frequently admired characteristic “ideality” of those well known figures.

Someone (I don't know who) asserted that all individuals, as individuals, have to be taken as comic and thus untragic, that the Greeks in general could not tolerate individuals in their tragic theatre. In fact, they seem to have felt this way. That Platonic distinction between and evaluation of the “idea” in contrast to the “idol” in connection with likenesses lies deeply grounded in the nature of the Greeks. But for us to make use of Plato's terminology, we would have to talk of the tragic figures of the Greek stage in something like the following terms: the one truly real Dionysus appears in a multiplicity of shapes, in the mask of a struggling hero and, as it were, bound up in the nets of the individual will. So now the god made manifest talks and acts in such a way that he looks like an erring, striving, suffering individual. The fact that he appears in general with this epic definition and clarity is the effect of Apollo, the interpreter of dreams, who indicates to the chorus its Dionysian state by this metaphorical appearance.

In reality, however, that hero is the suffering Dionysus of the mysteries, that god who experiences the suffering of the individual in himself, the god about whom the amazing myths tell how he, as a child, was dismembered by the Titans and now in this condition is venerated as Zagreus. Through this is revealed the idea that this dismemberment, the essentially Dionysian suffering, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, that we also have to look upon the condition of individuation as the source and basis for all suffering, as something in itself reprehensible. From the laughing of this Dionysus arose the Olympian gods, from his tears arose mankind. In that existence as dismembered god Dionysus has the dual nature of a cruelly savage daemon and a lenient, gentle master.

The initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries hoped for a rebirth of Dionysus, which we now can understand as the mysterious end of individuation. The initiate's song of jubilation cried out to this approaching third Dionysus. And only with this hope was there a ray of joy on the face of the fragmented world, torn apart into individuals, just as myth reveals in the picture of the eternal sorrow of sunken Demeter, who rejoices again for the first time when someone says to her that she might be able once again to give birth to Dionysus. In these established concepts we already have assembled all the components of a profound and pessimistic world view, together with the mysterious teachings of tragedy: the basic acknowledgement of the unity of all existing things, the idea of individuation as the ultimate foundation of all evil, art as the joyful hope that the spell of individuation is there for us to break, as a premonition of a re-established unity.

It has been pointed out earlier that the Homeric epic is the poetry of Olympian culture, with which it sang its own song of victory over the terrors of the fight against the Titans. Now, under the overwhelming influence of tragic poetry, the Homeric myths were newly reborn and show in this metamorphosis that by now the Olympian culture is overcome by an even deeper world view. The defiant Titan Prometheus reported to his Olympian torturer that for the first time his rule was threatened by the highest danger, unless he quickly joined forces with him. In Aeschylus we acknowledge the union of the frightened Zeus, worried about the end of his power, with the Titan.

Thus the earlier age of the Titans is belatedly brought back from Tartarus into the light once more. The philosophy of wild and naked nature looks with the unconcealed countenance of truth at the myths of

the Homeric world dancing past it. Before the flashing eyes of this goddess, those myths grow pale and tremble, until they press the mighty fist of the Dionysian artist into the service of the new divinity. The Dionysian truth takes over the entire realm of myth as the symbol of its knowledge and speaks of this knowledge, partly in the public culture of the tragedy and partly in the secret celebrations of the dramatic mystery celebrations, but always in the disguise of the old myths. What power was it which liberated Prometheus from his vultures and transformed myth to a vehicle of Dionysian wisdom? It was the Herculean power of music. Music, which attained its highest manifestation in tragedy, had the power to interpret myth with a new significance in the most profound manner, something we have already described before as the most powerful capacity of music.

For it is the lot of every myth gradually to creep into the crevice of an assumed historical reality and to become analyzed as a unique fact in answer to the historical demands of some later time or other. The Greeks were already fully on their way to labeling cleverly and arbitrarily the completely mythical dreams of their youth as historical, pragmatic, and youthful history. For this is the way religions tend to die out, namely, when the mythical pre-conditions of a religion, under the strong, rational eyes of an orthodox dogmatism become classified as a closed totality of historical events and people begin anxiously to defend the credibility of their myths, but to resist the naturally continuing life and growth of those myths, and when the feeling for the myth dies out and in its place the claim to put religion on a historical footing steps onto the scene.

The newly born genius of Dionysian music now seized these dying myths, and in its hands myth blossomed again, with colours which it had never shown before, with a scent which stirred up a longing premonition of a metaphysical world. After this last flourishing, myth collapsed, its leaves grew pale, and soon the mocking Lucians of antiquity grabbed up the flowers, scattered around by all winds, colourless and withered. Through tragedy myth attains its most profound content, its most expressive form. It lifts itself up again, like a wounded hero, and with the excessive power and wise tranquility of a dying man, its eyes burn with its last powerful light.

What did you want, you rascal Euripides, when you sought to force this dying man once more into your service? He died under your powerful hands. And now you had to use a counterfeit, masked myth, which was able only to dress itself up with the old splendour, like Hercules's monkey. And as myth died with you, so died the genius of music as well. Even though you plundered with greedy hands all the gardens of music, you achieved only a counterfeit masked music. And because you abandoned Dionysus, you were then abandoned by Apollo. Even if you hunted out all the passions from their beds and charmed them into your circle, even though you sharpened and filed a really sophisticated dialectic for the speeches of your heroes, nevertheless your heroes have only counterfeit, masked passions and speak only a counterfeit, masked language.