
Culture, Tragedy and Pessimism in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*

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The true symbolism is one in which the particular represents the universal . . . as the living and momentary revelation of the inexhaustible (Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*).

In this essay I look at *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche's first published book, in order to explore two related issues. First, beginning with Nietzsche's own later critical look back at the book, I argue that in lamenting both the influence of Schopenhauer, and the inclusion of an extended discussion of contemporary German culture, Nietzsche does not do justice to the important interdependence of these elements and his analysis of tragedy and its significance in the book. His analysis of tragedy and its significance was both deeply Schopenhauerian, and deeply committed to cultural critique. Second, I argue that to understand the meaning of the concept of tragedy with which Nietzsche works in *The Birth of Tragedy* we may begin from the perspective of the term's common usage in English, attending to phenomena often labelled tragic, and glimpsing what holds sway just beneath their surfaces. For Nietzsche, the concept's meaning is rooted in what we find him taking from Schopenhauer's pessimism, but in the end, I argue, although Nietzsche's expressed understanding of tragedy in these early years drew heavily on Schopenhauerian pessimism, it nevertheless exceeded that influence.

In the first section, I sketch Nietzsche's largely Schopenhauerian cultural critique, locating it with respect to two relevant issues in the history of early modern philosophy, focusing on its

philosophical underpinnings, and making a brief excursus into Nietzsche's reading of Anaximander in order to help clarify what is at stake.

I. Seriousness and the Self-Limitation of Theoretical Culture

In the original preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, addressed to Richard Wagner, Nietzsche imagined Wagner receiving a copy of the book. He imagined how his friend would see both Leopold Rau's image of Prometheus unbound and Nietzsche's name on the title page, and thereby be convinced that the author had "something serious and pressing [*Ernstes und Eindringliches*] to say" (17).¹ Indeed, late in 1871 when Nietzsche received Rau's image, he sent it to the publisher, writing "It is Prometheus freed from his chains . . . It is a small masterpiece and says in a simple way much that is serious."² However, as he made clear in the preface, he expected nothing but agitation—"apprehensions, excitements, and misunderstandings"—from the "aesthetic public" in response to his book (17). Only a very few noble souls were capable of properly understanding the seriousness of ancient Greek tragedy and the titanic powers it unbound, it seemed, and such a state of affairs was symptomatic of a contemporary cultural crisis.

The cultural crisis is discussed at length especially beginning in Section 16 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the first of ten sections Nietzsche added to an earlier version of the manuscript (that had as its focus Greek Tragedy and Socrates alone). Fifteen years later, in his famous 1886 preface entitled "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," he wrote that he regretted having "darkened and debased" the book with "Schopenhauer's terms," but much more than that, he regretted having "debased the grandiose Greek problem . . . by introducing the most modern things!" (10; §6). Thus in 1886 Nietzsche made it clear that although *The Birth of Tragedy* revealed important features of ancient

Greek culture and raised enduring philosophical issues, in retrospect he was unhappy both with the influence of Schopenhauer and with the assessment of contemporary German culture. However, this is a tangled issue because the conception of ancient Greek tragedy and its significance, the influence of Schopenhauer, and the discussion of contemporary German culture in the book are deeply connected and interdependent.

Nietzsche began to read Schopenhauer seriously as a 21 year old student in 1865, when he was already interested in antiquity, nature, suffering and music—important themes in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Soon enough he had criticisms of Schopenhauer, but still in late 1869 in a discussion of his relationship with Wagner, who was also influenced by Schopenhauer, he wrote: "Once every two or three weeks I spend a few days at his estate . . . and consider this friendship the greatest achievement of my life, next to that which I owe Schopenhauer."³ Within one year of this letter, the earliest version of *The Birth of Tragedy* was born, and within two years the book was complete.

Nietzsche argued that a "rebirth of tragedy" was both needed and possible in Germany (86; §16), and he understood the origin of that possibility to be located, to a great extent, in the theoretical work of Kant and Schopenhauer. Until recently, culture had been dominated by the Socratic illusion that existence is ultimately both intelligible and remediable. As we know, Socrates questioned everything in his search for moral knowledge, and although he never claimed to find it, neither did he waver. He held firmly to the view that existence is intelligible and fundamentally oriented to the good, even if this can be fully comprehended only by divinity. From the perspective of this imagined viewpoint, a perspective that would exceed existence itself, one could judge existence—even attempt to fix it—which would amount to "socratism," or the

illusory "optimism" of "theoretical man," in Nietzsche's terms. If a culture believes the illusion that anything may be understood and reformed in theory, then theological, philosophical or scientific theory will eclipse its world, resulting in the domination of theoretical man. However, the illusion of knowledge, being an illusion, eventually runs up against its own limits, for the unintelligible is the case, as we shall see.

One way to understand the relevant issues is to turn very briefly to a couple of themes in early modern philosophy.⁴ The early modern representational theory of knowledge—the "way of ideas" as Locke called it—began in earnest in the first half of the seventeenth century with Descartes, according to whom, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, our cognitive access to the world is mediated by "ideas"—i.e., by mental representations (AT 37-42). Furthermore, the idea of causal necessity, a concept central to much of the philosophical discourse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is also central to Descartes' *Meditations*, the argument of which turns on the principle "evident by the light of nature," that "something cannot come into being out of nothing" (AT 40-52).⁵ With respect to the representational theory of knowledge specifically, if the subject's conscious awareness of the object is necessarily mediated by some kind of representation, the subject can never have unmediated awareness of the object. The object "in itself" cannot be known. In the eighteenth century, Hume not only drew and embraced this conclusion, but he went on to argue, with respect to the principle of causal necessity, that it is the case that neither by logical analysis nor by empirical apprehension may we find a connection of necessity between any two events. Although experience leads us to believe every event is the necessary effect of a prior cause, in fact we cannot know this for certain (39-53; §7). Kant may be interpreted to be in agreement with Hume's argument, but not with his conclusion, for he replied that in addition to the two domains of

logical analysis and empirical apprehension, there are the transcendental conditions necessary for the possibility of experience. He argued that such conditions include, most importantly, "categories of the understanding" which, being necessary for, are actually co-constitutive of our experience of "empirical reality" and its fundamental laws of "nature." "Nature . . . is dependent upon these categories as the original ground of its necessary conformity to law" (B165). One of these "categories" is that of causal necessity, such that a condition of the possibility of our experience of events in nature is that the events experienced be constituted according to the category of causal necessity. This seemed to overcome Hume's scepticism concerning necessary connection between experienced events, but it failed to overcome the mediation problem inherent to representational theories of knowledge because the categories of experience can never be said to apply to things independent of experience. Experience is necessarily enveloped within mediated representations—the "phenomenal" world of empirical reality whose fundamental laws of nature guarantee a causally regular world for our experience. However, lurking forever beyond the limits of the phenomena are inaccessible "noumenal" "things in themselves," to which we are unable to attribute causal, or any, order.⁶

According to Nietzsche, the great achievement of Kant, and of Schopenhauer, who followed him closely, was to make this problem—i.e., the limitation of knowledge—theoretically explicit. From the perspective of theoretical culture itself, Kant showed that our legitimate knowledge is based on categories, but the categories are not applicable to things in themselves. Thus there are limits to knowledge. Science is fundamentally limited by what it cannot grasp, and it cannot grasp the very ground of a thing's existence in the thing in itself. Existence exceeds science.

In contradistinction to socratism, if one could assume the perspective of existence, then theoretical stances toward what exists—i.e., science, whether theoretical, empirical or moral—could be delimited, evaluated, problematized. As he wrote in the 1886 preface: "What I began to grapple with at that time was something fearful and dangerous . . . in any case a *new* problem: today I would call it the *problem of science* itself—science grasped for the first time as problematic, as questionable" (4; §2). What Nietzsche grappled with in *The Birth of Tragedy* was both a question he would not leave behind, and a question that then seemed best approached in Schopenhauerian terms. Nietzsche's cultural analysis and his analysis of Kant and Schopenhauer in 1871 were interwoven, for he argued that it was Kant and Schopenhauer's great achievement to make the limits of theoretical culture explicit within theoretical culture itself. Forging a path Heidegger would later retrace, Nietzsche argued that as theoretical culture approached its zenith, its dangerously problematic nature began to come into view, creating the conditions for new perspectives that might save it from disaster.⁷

Modernity has resulted in a variety of disastrous outcomes, eliciting various degrees of apocalyptic assessment in a selection of authors from Rousseau and Schiller to Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, all of whom found fault with reason in some form.⁸ For Nietzsche, "the disaster slumbering in the womb of theoretical culture gradually begins to frighten modern man," and as the danger grows, modern man "searches in agitation among the treasure of his experiences for means to avert the danger." But it has been the greatest theorists of theoretical culture, "great men of versatility," who "have meanwhile been able with incredible level-headedness to use the tools of science itself in order to lay bare the limits and relative nature of knowledge itself and so to deny decisively the claim of science to universal validity and universal goals." This alone has

revealed the truth about theoretical culture's scientific optimism, i.e., that science, and its leading category of necessary causation, cannot in fact reveal the ground of things. "[T]he delusion which presumed to fathom the innermost essence of things with the aid of causality was for the first time recognized for what it was"—as delusion. "The great audacity and wisdom of *Kant* and *Schopenhauer* succeeded in winning the most difficult victory, the victory over the optimism" that constitutes "the substratum of our culture," that "had believed that all the enigmas of the world could be known and fathomed," and that "had treated . . . causality as . . . the most universal validity." What had been taken to be the ultimate reality of modern scientific culture, i.e., causally ordered empirical reality, "Kant revealed," was only "the mere phenomenon," "making real knowledge" of the essence of things "impossible," and, "according to an expression of Schopenhauer's, lulling the dreamer into a deeper sleep." But, "With this knowledge"—i.e., knowledge of the limits of knowledge—"a culture is introduced which I dare to describe as tragic" (98-99; §18).

Thus, in reaching its own limits of utility and credibility, the illusion of theoretical optimism was revealed and delimited. In its self-delimitation, carried out by Kant and Schopenhauer, the radically un-optimistic perspective of the unintelligible thing in itself was revealed. The accomplishment of Kant and Schopenhauer was the critique of socratism from within. In these two great German philosophers, science came to recognize its own limits. The thing in itself, which exceeds the categories of understanding, is necessarily beyond the limits of science. We can say nothing scientific about it. If the apparent world is thoroughly open to scientific analysis, but what exceeds it is not, then the very ground of what is apparent, which must exceed what is apparent, is not scientific.

Schopenhauer covered much of the same ground as Kant, with some modifications, an important one of which was that talk of individuated "things in themselves" had to be replaced by talk of the unified, amorphous, process of pre-rational existential life-force, energy or power—this because individuation itself must be on the side of experience (and Schopenhauer's version of the categories). Thus the world in itself is blind striving life-force, what Schopenhauer called the "will," the fundamental energy or power at the existential ground of all things, which science grasps only as a formally organized, individuated, and necessarily causal reality (according to the categories of experience).

In the end, there is the extra-temporal life-force and there are our evanescent apparent lives, and these are but two attributes of the unique whole, for in a godless cosmos whose ground is amorphous life-force, we are each abandoned to our apportioned fates, to be folded back into the un-individuated process after our short spans—to be annihilated as individuals—and whatever we produce here on its surface, as it were, is radically limited—merely a temporal flicker in the timeless process of the abyss. If the will is the universal life-force that constitutes the ground of existence for each of us, then your individuation and mine, as well as the causal relations and individuation of the experienced world, are all fundamentally illusory. *Life*—for anyone who thought a god might save us—*sucks*. Schopenhauer was the great "pessimist."

Excursus: Anaximander, the First Pessimist Philosopher

In a letter to Rohde, referring to his work on the "pre-platonic philosophers" Nietzsche wrote: "I have . . . discovered a special significance to Anaximander."⁹ In *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, a manuscript Nietzsche would leave unpublished, but one conceived and composed

about the same time *The Birth of Tragedy* was completed and published, Nietzsche read the famous Anaximander fragment as follows: "Where existent things have their coming-to-be, thereto must they also perish, 'according to necessity, for they must pay retribution and penalty for their injustices, in accordance with the assessment of time'" (33).¹⁰ All things, as we might encounter them, come into being and pass out of being. Even the hardest diamond must become and perish in time. Becoming-and-perishing is the only constant attributable to all things. For Anaximander, according to Nietzsche, "existent things have their coming-to-be" and their "perishing" in "το απειρον." Nietzsche reports that Aristotle tells us that for Anaximander το απειρον is "immortal (αθανατον) and indestructible," "embracing" and "governing" "all things" (παντα) (32). It is eternal Being, the ground of all things.

In terms of its constituent parts, the term απειρον consists of the privative (α-) plus "boundaries" (-περατα)—i.e., "un-bound," "un-limited." Nietzsche sides with those who argue, very plausibly, that the concept of infinite extension was not at all likely during Anaximander's period, thus the term designates that which has *throughout itself* no boundaries whatsoever, no distinctions of any sort. "It is not the 'Infinite' but instead the 'Indefinite'" (36).

If eternal Being, the ground of all things, is the Indefinite, we are forced to discuss it in negative terms alone. It has no encounterable determinations whatsoever. On this reading, all things—each of which is a determinate thing (which becomes and perishes) and so may be described individually and positively in the terms of its encounterable determinations—become and perish from and into the virtually indescribable eternal ground. Thus we must acknowledge a radical divide between the Indefinite and all things—"a sort of absolute dualism" (44). Anaximander "needs a background unity that can be described only negatively; the Unlimited,

something that cannot be given any predicate from the actual world of Becoming and so something like the 'thing-in-itself.' This was the incredible leap of Anaximander! His successors went more slowly" (33). At the beginning of philosophy, then, well before the onset of Socratic optimism, knowledge was appropriately limited.

However, Anaximander's fragment says more than that all things must become and perish from and into the radically limiting noumenal abyss. It continues: "for they must pay retribution and penalty for their injustices, in accordance with the assessment of time" (33). Anaximander says that the world of all things is "afflicted with injustice (*αδικια*)" (37). Nietzsche reads him as arguing: "The individual who breaks off from the Unlimited must nonetheless return once again to the same, in accordance with the order of time (*κατα την του χρονου ταξιν*)" (33). This is to say that if there is any justification at all for existence it lies in the Indefinite, in the eternal ground, not in individual things, each of which owes to the Indefinite its fleeting span. This debt is shouldered as "retribution (*δικη*)" and "penalty (*τισις*)," for no individual has the right to exist. The existence of each individual is an "injustice" (33). Thus, "Thales was infinitely outdone" by Anaximander: "the question here was no longer purely physical." Indeed, according to this view, what lies at the bottom of all things is "unexpiated injustice," and this "offers a look into the most profound ethical problems" (34), "posing . . . the question concerning the value of human existence (the first pessimist philosopher)" (37). For Nietzsche, Anaximander stood with Schopenhauerian pessimism on the side of the unintelligible life-force at the ground of all things, with a deep awareness of our tragic fates and the wisdom of Silenus (which we shall encounter in Section III below).

If the Indefinite as existential ground—which Nietzsche calls "metaphysically true Being" (37)—is a legitimate perspective, then despite the fact that others might advance views about the historical development of the world toward some final goal, we will be eternally returned to the same early ancient Greek depictions of the recurrence of becoming—the only true name for Being.

In the next section, I introduce Nietzsche's view of tragedy and its fundamentally oppositional structure, locating that structure with respect to some relevant historical precedents.

II. Aesthetics of Opposition

Opposing the contemporary culture of theoretical man, the Schopenhauerian will demarcated the limits of science. From the perspective of those limits, the opportunity arose to embrace the deep truths of pessimism and constitute a new tragic culture. What drove Nietzsche's interpretive analysis of tragedy in particular was the replacement of "a single principle" to account for "the necessary source of life for every work of art" with two opposed principles, tendencies or drives (86; §16). This was not altogether foreign to relatively recent aesthetics.

As early as 1766, in his *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, Lessing criticized Winckelmann's famous analysis of the Laocoön statue group in part by arguing that poetry and painting work in fundamentally different registers—"succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter" (486; Ch. 18). Whereas the poet's work is a description of moments unfolding in time, the painter's is a depiction of forms in atemporal space. Although this is an interesting opposition, and one that plays a role in the long story of German criticism's relationship to Winckelmann's immense influence, a story that concludes with

Nietzsche in some sense, Nietzsche himself in effect grouped painting and poetry together as plastic arts, which he opposed to genuine music, as we shall see shortly.

Schiller developed an interesting opposition in his *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, first published in three parts between late 1795 and early 1796. Among "ancients," "naive" poets "experienced" nature, doing so in and through natural "subjectivity," but soon enough, among "moderns," for "sentimental" poets natural subjectivity was separated from experience by "arbitrary and artificial forms" and became an "idea," an "object" of interest (196). "They felt naturally, while we feel the natural" (195). The naive poet "is nature," the sentimental poet "will seek it" (200). Since Euripides (in contrast to Aeschylus) is a sentimental poet, and Shakespeare (along with Homer) is a naive poet (196, 197), the terms ancient and modern exceed merely chronological criteria. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, although he criticizes Schiller's reading of Homer (29; §3), Nietzsche does mention Schiller favourably, and with respect to the opposition between naive and sentimental poetry Schiller's specific contrast between Aeschylus and Euripides is suggestive of Nietzsche's view. For both authors, as well as for Aristophanes, the better natural poet was Aeschylus, in contrast to Euripides, but the world of the former was eclipsed by what we might call the intellectualist manners of the world of the latter.¹¹

However, another text by Schiller, containing another basic opposition, is more instructive with respect to *The Birth of Tragedy*. In *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, first published in 1795, and revised and republished in 1801, Schiller developed a significantly Kantian ethical and political aesthetics in which he distinguished, first, "the sensuous drive," i.e., the finite, passive, and material impulse of life, second, "the formal drive," i.e., the universal and free impulse of rationality, and third, "the play drive," i.e., the reconciliation of life and reason in

aesthetics as sensuous and free play. Here, the aesthetic is crucially important with respect to overcoming the barbarism and savagery of modernity, and the atomization of individuals caused by rationalistic hyper-specialization, and it properly depends on some form of reconciliation between two prior and opposed drives (118-132; Letters 12-15). It is instructive to anticipate and contrast a couple of basic structures in Nietzsche's view of tragedy with these structures in Schiller's aesthetics. Although there are crucial differences between the two, we can say that for Nietzsche tragedy is a crucially important kind of aesthetic experience with serious consequences, it involves dis-individuation, and it depends on the coming together of two opposed fundamental drives, as we shall see.

Fundamental opposition is the essence of tragedy itself for Hegel, who discussed tragedy at length toward the end of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, delivered between 1818 and 1829, and published posthumously between 1835 and 1838. "For Hegel," in the words of Mark Roche, "tragedy is the conflict of two substantive positions, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails either to recognize the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth; the conflict can be resolved only with the fall of the hero" (12). Nietzsche was not a Hegelian, but as with Schiller we can make an interesting structural comparison between his view and Hegel's, this time with respect to tragedy specifically in both authors. Nietzsche understood the highest form of dramatic tragedy to involve the coming together of two deeply opposed fundamental drives, a coming together that included as an essential moment the annihilation of the hero as an individual.

Like Lessing, Schiller, Hegel, and others, Nietzsche discovered fundamental opposition in aesthetics, and he was convinced that the secrets of Greek tragedy would be unlocked by his own

dyad of opposed principles. He saw in the clear imagery of epic poetry, especially Homeric epic poetry, a poetry of images, just as painters and sculptors produce images in paint and stone respectively. Thus poetry, painting and sculpture are "plastic" arts in an important respect. Some forms of music, especially music that accompanies epic poetry, do not exceed the category of plastic art broadly conceived. Other forms of music, however, and lyric poetry as well, are not principally governed by the representation of images. We might say they express reality, rather than represent it in images. Since ultimate reality is the will, its self-expression in music is more primordial than plastic images of the phenomena, which, in turn, are images of the will. The less mediated the music, the more primordial and the more genuine it is. Thus painting, sculpture, and poetry represent the phenomenal representations of empirical reality, in two dimensional, three dimensional, or described, images respectively, whereas genuine music cannot be said to depict or represent the phenomenal representations of empirical reality at all.

Having recognized that tremendous opposition, I felt a strong need to approach the essence of Greek tragedy and in it the most profound revelation of Hellenic genius: for only now did I believe myself in possession of the magic [*Zaubers*] necessary for my soul to envisage vividly the original problem of tragedy, beyond the phraseology of our habitual aesthetic (87; §16).

It is clear then that these opposed principles are central to Nietzsche's interpretative analysis of Greek tragedy; it is equally clear that the principles are taken from his reading of Schopenhauer. Referring both to the discussion of music in the latter's *World as Will and Representation* (published in 1848, after an original smaller 1818 edition), and to Wagner's approval of it, Nietzsche argues:

The revelation of this tremendous opposition which stretches like a yawning abyss between the . . . plastic arts and the . . . art of music has been granted to only one of the great thinkers to the extent that . . . he recognized that music possessed a character and origin different from all other arts, because music, unlike all the other arts, is not a copy of

the phenomenon but an unmediated copy of the will itself . . . On this most important insight of aesthetics . . . Wagner stamped his seal of approval, strengthening its eternal truth . . . in his *Beethoven* (86; §16).

In the original preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, in addition to invoking Wagner as the ideal interlocutor for the book's "serious" discussions, as we have seen, Nietzsche pointed out that his own book was being prepared at virtually the same pregnant historical moment as Wagner's essay on Beethoven, which was published in 1870 (17). For Wagner, the comprehension of the significance of Beethoven's music depended on the comprehension of Schopenhauer's theory of music. Wagner saw the opposition at the heart of Schopenhauer's aesthetics foreshadowed in Goethe and Schiller. Goethe leaned "toward plastic art"—he was "on the side of consciousness," and "a thorough student of the visual world"—whereas Schiller "was far more strongly attracted to an exploration of the subsoil of inner consciousness that lies entirely aloof from vision (*Anschauung*), to that 'thing in itself' of the Kantian philosophy." Thus Goethe (who leaned toward representing the apparent world) and Schiller (who leaned toward exploring inner, underlying reality), according to Wagner, could be understood as "journeying from either extreme" of the opposition that "comes out quite plainly in the plastic artist, when compared with the musician." "[I]t was *Schopenhauer* who first defined the position of Music among the fine arts with philosophic clearness, ascribing to it a totally different nature from that of either plastic or poetic art."¹²

When it comes to the arts, for Schopenhauer, as for Nietzsche who followed him closely, the plastic arts create representations of the fundamentally illusory representations that constitute our empirical reality. Ultimately, the plastic arts represent representations of the will. However, "music," writes Schopenhauer in Nietzsche's extended quotation from Section 52 of the first

volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, "differs from all the other arts in that it is not a copy of the phenomenon . . . but an unmediated copy of the will itself and so represents the metaphysical in relation to the whole physical world and the thing in itself in relation to the whole phenomenal world" (88, §16). Music directly represents the primordial surges, reversals, and lulls of the will (as pre-rational existential life-force). Here, aesthetics and metaphysics are woven into each other: the plastic arts represent apparent reality, genuine music represents the underlying abysmal ground of apparent reality, and each of us necessarily exists between these two realities. With respect to metaphysical truth proper, music is the primordial art form, whereas the plastic arts are derivative.

Schopenhauer and Wagner were Nietzsche's Virgil and Beatrice, guiding him through the entire divine comedy of life itself, and leading him to the will as God's other at the heart of ancient Greek tragedy. Despite what Nietzsche wrote in 1886, the conception of tragedy and its significance in *The Birth of Tragedy* are not readily separable from the influence of his great pessimistic guide.

In the next section, I flesh out the meaning and relevance of the concept of tragedy for Nietzsche, drawing on common usage, on Nietzsche's reading of the Greeks, and on Schopenhauerian pessimism.

III. Tragedy and Pessimism

As we have seen, Nietzsche's reading of the Schopenhauerian opposition between plastic art (whose object is the representational world of phenomena), and genuine music (whose object is the noumenal will), served as his guide through ancient Greek tragedy and its significance. We have also seen that the objects of this very same opposition, perhaps rooted a little more squarely

in his reading of Kant, served as Nietzsche's guide to the assessment of the contemporary culture of theoretical man. It is also the case that his critical assessment of Socratic and Euripidean theoretical culture as that which eclipsed the unsurpassed tragedy of Aeschylus and, to a lesser degree, Sophocles, is virtually identical with his critical assessment of the contemporary—i.e., German—culture of theoretical man. In the end, it would be very difficult to pry Nietzsche's interpretive analysis of ancient Greek tragedy and its significance free from his critical assessment of Socratic and Euripidean culture, an assessment which itself would be equally difficult to pry free from the critical assessment of German culture. And, finally, both the assessment of German culture and the interpretive analysis of tragedy were guided by the Schopenhauerian opposition.

For Nietzsche, the pessimism Schopenhauer laid bare was what no one had yet seen in the Greek tragedy of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Echoing the will concealed within all things, tragic music drew its audience to the precipice, while tragic verse interpreted the experience in poetic images. The result was a brilliant representation of the thrilling, ecstatic and indescribably merciless power of fundamental existence.

I now want to suggest that this interpretation of the concept of tragedy may be approached if we begin from the perspective of the term's common usage in English, attending to phenomena often labelled tragic in order to glimpse what holds sway just beneath their surfaces.

Certainly, we use the terms tragedy and tragic in straightforward ways to indicate events involving great suffering. However, often enough in cases of great suffering we glimpse the deeper meaning of the concept. Bearing in mind a case of great suffering, we may be overcome. Part of what overcomes us is shock at the devastation undergone by the victim. But in addition to

the shocking devastation, something more may bear down on us. What is it that holds sway in the unbearable experience of what is borne in mind in such a case?

There is the sense that the suffering was apportioned unforgivingly, brutally. In its very being the event had a merciless inertia—that is, the set of forces that constituted it, once begun, ineluctably had its way with the victim. Even where the event might have occurred very quickly, or where the suffering of the victim might have been very brief, there is still the sense that the victim was driven under by utterly unforgiving forces—forces completely deaf to his or her cares, struggles or cries. The event was ruled by a startlingly unwelcome inevitability. Once begun, not only was something suffered, it had to be suffered. Bearing such an event in mind, the inevitability of the demise of each one of us, of ourselves, of our works, of our children, bears down on us. Recalling Nietzsche's Anaximander, we might say that no one or thing has a right to exist.

Commonly in the tragic drama of Aeschylus and Sophocles, a great mythical figure was mercilessly crushed despite his or her best intentions. In general, the set of forces—psychological or otherwise—that constituted the great figure was essential to the event of suffering such that the figure's fated portion (*μοιρα*) was inevitable—it was part of his or her very being, and had to unfold without mercy. A figure such as Oedipus, who had been forewarned of his horrible fate, but who was clever enough to solve the great riddle of the sphinx, nevertheless not only could not evade his fate, he had to run headlong into it. All things, great kings included, are injustices exceeded by the will.

What drew Athenian audiences to these representations of inevitable and horrible suffering? We might imagine that the plays were something like horror films in which writers

skilfully manipulated the psychology of their audiences in order to entertain them. Since the horror film audience expects horrible surprises, but the expectation of surprise must not ruin the surprises themselves, the skilful manipulation of audience psychology is essential to the horror genre. The Greek plays are certainly surprising with respect to the severity of the events undergone by the principle figures: national armies are ground into the earth, brothers kill each other, wives kill husbands, and sons mothers. Rape, murder, and indefinite torture—these are the foremost elements of ancient Greek tragedy. However, the surprise is more ours than the Athenians'. The Athenian audience had expectations of the rendition of horrible events, and it might have even expected them to be portrayed in new and somewhat surprising ways, but the surprise was not what was essential. After all, the Athenian was sufficiently familiar with the popular myths at the heart of each tragedy well before going to the theatre. For Nietzsche, the attraction of the drama of Aeschylus and Sophocles had its origin in sources much deeper than psychological manipulation. In fact, according to Nietzsche, psychological manipulation began with Euripides, and, Nietzsche argues, it brought to an end what had made Greek tragedy great.

Athenians were drawn to genuine tragedy not by the prospect of exciting entertainment, but rather by the prospect of a vicarious experience of being overcome by the inevitability of the life-force in a manner that would rekindle the lust for life itself. Life as unbearable—but also the very same life relished. These are the two opposed perspectives between which Nietzsche stretched his pre-Euripidean Greeks. On the one hand, the wisdom of Silenus:

Miserable ephemeral race, children of chance and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it is best for you not to hear? The very best of all things is completely beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best thing for you is—to meet an early death (27; §3).

That is, the unbearable wisdom of the will—that our life-span is but a fleeting mode of the inexorable life-force—represented directly in the music of genuine tragedy. On the other hand, the wisdom Nietzsche saw in Homeric heroes such as Achilles:

[T]he real *pain* of the Homeric men relates to their taking leave of . . . [life], above all in the near future: so that now it could be said of them in a reversal of the wisdom of Silenus that 'the very worst thing of all would be to meet an early death, the second worst to die at all.' Once lament sounds forth, it is heard again for the premature death of Achilles, for the continual passing of mankind, like leaves in the wind, for the decline of the age of heroes. It is not unworthy of the greatest heroes to yearn to live on, even as a day labourer (28-9; §3).

That is, the wisdom of what appears to us to be worth living for—i.e., embracing only apparently significant endeavours day to day—represented in the poetry of genuine tragedy.

Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedies were strung between these two opposed perspectives, and Nietzsche imagined a culture in which audiences resonated with their seriousness. In the next, and last, section, I indicate how all this actually exceeds Schopenhauer.

IV. Ablaze in Unity with the Abyss

Schopenhauer's influence on Nietzsche in 1871 was not total. In at least one very important respect it was significantly limited—i.e., in his evaluation of pessimism. As Nietzsche tells us in the 1886 preface, for Schopenhauer pessimism's look into the abyss "leads . . . to *resignation*." "Oh, how far removed I was at that time from precisely this whole attitude of resignation!" (10; §6). With respect to this, Nietzsche departed from Schopenhauer. He imagined that when someone from a healthy culture peered into the abyss, and did so from strength of will, he or she would suffer the unintelligible and merciless truth of existence, but not without affirmation, for in this suffering he or she would become one with what he or she was, i.e., the

will itself, leaving behind the illusion of individuation. Of course, becoming one with what one is requires that one's self be overcome, and that terrorizes the self, but because the individuated self is an illusion of the one will, the terror itself merely veils the awesome power of the self-exceeding assemblage that is the will. In this bizarre and radical alternative to Neoplatonic identification with the One beyond knowing, the individual fuses with and is lost in what truly exceeds intellectual light, in the pulsating process of the ground of existence, leaving behind the illusions of individuation, causality, space, and time.¹³ Becoming one with all the power and justification that is the case, the result is self-transcending joyous affirmation. Beyond evaluation, ceaselessly exceeding itself, the will holds sway.

The Athenian who re-emerged from the true darkness, terrorized, displaced, and exhausted, found in the tragic poetry brilliant illusions—shining representations—still dripping with existence, and in them the lust for life was rekindled.

Nietzsche's account of all this exceeded Schopenhauer:

It is here, perhaps, for the first time that a pessimism 'beyond good and evil' announces itself, here that 'perversity of mind' gets a chance to speak and formulate itself, the perversity of mind against which Schopenhauer tirelessly directed the curses and thunderbolts of his greatest wrath—a philosophy which dared to belittle morality itself, by relegating it to the world of the phenomenon . . . the realm of 'illusions', as appearance, madness, error, interpretation, contrivance, art (8; 1886 Preface §5).

Promethean dawn, Olympian evening—the return of the titanic forces was perhaps experienced first in Nietzsche's first book. In the end, the question is, from what need did Nietzsche write *The Birth of Tragedy*—a book that celebrates pessimism! For Schopenhauer, his principle guide to pessimism, "Between the spirit of Graeco-Roman paganism and the spirit of Christianity the real antithesis is that of the affirmation and denial of the will to live—in which regard Christianity is in the last resort fundamentally in the right" (62). How bizarre this sentiment seems today.

Despite a radical opening to the abyss, echoing the tradition of western theoretical culture Schopenhauer believed he could evaluate life—ultimately the will itself—from the perspective of moral science: "what is the moral significance of life itself?" But, for Nietzsche, "the most difficult question" of the book was: "Viewed through the optic of *life*, what is the meaning of—morality?" (8; 1886 Preface §4). Nietzsche was moved to embrace pessimism beyond the twilight of the moral science Schopenhauer continued to reflect into the radically indefinite darkness that limits all things.*

Notes

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¹ The image is available online: see Brown, the pages for the years 1871 and 1872.

² Nietzsche excerpt online: see Brown, the page for the year 1871.

³ Nietzsche excerpt online: see Brown, the page for the year 1869.

⁴ For the sake of brevity, I presume relevant family resemblances between leading philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hegel attempted to capture this in his discussions of "metaphysics" and "empiricism" as "preliminary conceptions" of the science of logic (65-80). Others have found evidence of a "mechanistic" paradigm in the period (e.g., see Westfall). Foucault's account of relevant discourses in the period is neither Hegelian nor mechanistic, but it performs an analogous classificatory function (e.g., see chapter 5). Many others have discussed these issues.

⁵ Causal necessity also plays important direct roles in Descartes' Sixth Meditation and in texts such as *The World*, and it both shares a great deal with, and influences a great deal of, early modern philosophy from Hobbes to La Mettrie and beyond.

⁶ This very brief sketch of relevant themes in early modern philosophy is expanded a little in my analysis of Sartre's philosophical beginnings (Duncan, 92-94, 99-100).

⁷ For Heidegger, "where enframing reigns"—i.e., where the essence of the technological, by which the world has been eclipsed, reigns—"there is *danger* in the highest sense." "But," he

quotes from Hölderlin, "where danger is, grows/ The Saving power also" (28). Perhaps the path was first forged by Hölderlin.

⁸ See Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (in *Essays*), and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁹ Nietzsche to Rohde, quoted by Whitlock in Nietzsche, *Pre-Platonics* 185.

¹⁰ For a discussion of Nietzsche's rendering of the fragment, which is not uncorroborated by other scholars, see Whitlock's discussion in Nietzsche, *Pre-Platonics* 191-93. Compare Kirk, Raven and Schofield 117-122.

¹¹ Nietzsche's criticism of Euripides, Socrates, and the culture of late fifth century Athens certainly echoes Aristophanes' *The Frogs*.

¹² Wagner, *Beethoven*.

¹³ See Wallis 88-89.

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