

For: *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*

## **NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH** **Nietzsche on Tragedy**

Viewed from close in, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872, hereafter: *BT*) beguiles with a dance of quasi-mythic concepts (Apollonian and Dionysian) and larger-than-life characters, including the centaur Silenus, the triumvirate of Attic tragedians, a theater spectator named Socrates, and the book's dedicatee Richard Wagner. The intellectual fermentation caused by such captivating figures has doubtless contributed to the work's remarkably broad appeal. For the reader who seeks to bring the overriding unity of Nietzsche's project into view, however, the cognitive distance gained through large-scale historical comparison proves salutary. Seen from that vantage, Nietzsche's little book marks a radical departure from the two-thousand-year tradition of philosophical and critical literature on tragedy. For Aristotle, who inaugurated that tradition, the essence of tragedy resides on the level of plot, a sequence of actions and consequences that are, if the play is truly excellent, so tightly knit together as to evince necessity. However diverse their views might be in other respects, such major theorists of tragedy as Lessing, Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel accept the priority of plot and action. Nietzsche's innovation vis-à-vis the theoretical tradition is to have denied that priority and therewith to have constituted an object of theoretical inquiry altogether different from that described by his predecessors. Of course, many of the theoretical components of *BT* were prepared for in the work of exactly those philosophers and critics just mentioned. Lessing's media theory, Schiller's distinction between the naïve and sentimental modes of feeling, Schelling's explorations of the philosophical content of myth, and Hegel's historical constructions all enter into *BT* in significant ways. Important too are the contributions of the great nineteenth-century philologists, especially Jacob Bernays' treatise on Aristotle's notion of katharsis (1857) and Johann Jakob Bachofen's monumental study *Matriarchy* (1861). Nietzsche's achievement does not come into being *ex nihilo*, but the originality of the overall view is nonetheless striking.

What motivates the paradigm shift and what is Nietzsche's alternative to the plot-centered conception of tragedy? For one thing, the available evidence indicates that plot was a late development, suggesting that from the start the aim of tragedy was not to represent actions, but to arouse/express pathos. In Nietzsche's

thought, this historical argument flows into an account of genre that accords decisive importance to the specificity of artistic media. Aristotle's insistence (*Poetics* 1450a37) that plot is the principle and soul of tragedy consigns staging and music to the status of extrinsic "embellishments" (1450b17), dispensable additions. Nietzsche considered this an absurdity tantamount to taking the libretto for the opera itself. Thus, a leading intention orienting Nietzsche's inquiry in *BT* is to develop a theory of tragedy that, in contrast to Aristotle's, gives due consideration to the genre's constitutive mode of symbolization. As the full title of *BT* indicates, this is to be achieved by disclosing the emergence of tragedy out of the "spirit of music."

The break with the plot-centered conception of tragedy and the project of excavating the specific configuration of communicative media within which the genre took shape are not Nietzsche's sole theoretical innovation. He also rejects the traditional account of tragic effect in terms of moral significance. In chapter twenty-four of *BT* he writes: "For the explanation of the tragic myth it is precisely the first requirement to seek its characteristic pleasure in the purely aesthetic sphere without reaching into the territory of pity, of fear, of the ethically sublime." We habitually think of the relevant writings of Aristotle, Lessing, and Schiller as contributions to the aesthetics of tragedy, but it is central to Nietzsche's self-understanding that his is in fact the only *purely aesthetic* account of tragic pleasure. Just this dismissal of extraneous moral issues and the rigorous attention to the aesthetic status of his object of investigation, he believes, distinguishes his project methodologically. As we shall see, there is good reason for this methodological resoluteness.

Interestingly, Nietzsche's insistence on a rigorously aesthetic conception is related to the functionalist design of his overall argument. The concept of function as such is foreign to Nietzsche's treatise, but I introduce it here to highlight the fact, insufficiently recognized in the scholarship, that Nietzsche's major concern is not the genetic derivation of the tragic genre, but the clarification of its particular achievement within the overall context of human life. Considered from this perspective, art, and especially the tragedy, shows itself to be the response to a specific human problem. This takes us to one of the deepest currents of Nietzsche's thought, his sense that human existence is *intrinsically* (not merely due to an exogenous danger) *imperiled*. By its very nature, human life is confronted with Hamlet's alternative: To be, or not to

be. Let us call this the immanent questionability of life: the fact that human existence can find itself bereft of the will to go on. Nietzsche speaks in this connection of the value of existence coming under threat of denial. A structural feature of human life (of the ontology of human existence) is that it can turn against itself in this way. Typically this fundamental imperilment is submerged beneath our quotidian concerns, but there are nonetheless situations, individual and cultural, when it recrudesces.

Two historical moments in which the value of existence falls under denial were especially salient to the young Nietzsche and the perception of their affinity almost certainly belongs among the organizing intuitions of *BT*. Let us call them moments of pessimistic crisis. The relevant examples are: Schopenhauer's bleak assessment of human existence; certain archaic Greek conceptions. Schopenhauer, of course, offers trenchant arguments for pessimism across his entire *oeuvre*. Most importantly for our present concerns, the condemnation of existence lies at the center of his conception of tragedy: "The true meaning of the tragedy is the deeper insight that the hero [through his demise] atones not for his particular sins, but for original sin, that is, for the sin of existence itself." In confirmation of this view, Schopenhauer cites these lines from Calderon: "Since the greatest guilt of man/Is that he was born." And in the same section (51) of *World as Will and Representation* he construes tragedy as a "quiescent of the Will" that conduces to resignation, asceticism, release from the will-to-live. Turning now to the earlier instance of a pessimistic crisis, we can start with a passage in Nietzsche's *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1873), in which a thought of Anaximander's is paraphrased as follows: "What is your existence worth [*werth*]? And if it is worth nothing, why do you exist? It is by virtue of your guilt, I say, that you sojourn in this existence." An even more radical statement of ancient Greek pessimism is the piece of "folk wisdom" Nietzsche cites, and then repeatedly recurs to, in *BT*. It is the answer given by the centaur Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, when compelled by King Midas to reveal what is the best thing for mankind. Nietzsche formulates the centaur's grim reply in such a way as to bring out its unremitting denial of existence: "The best thing of all is entirely unreachable for you: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the next best thing for you is – soon to die." (*BT* 3) The importance of this passage in *BT* can hardly be exaggerated. Nietzsche employs it to epitomize what he considers the deepest stratum of the ancient Greeks' cultural self-understanding, a dark vision likewise expressed in such mythic figurations as the vulture tearing at Prometheus' liver, the

horrific crimes of Oedipus, the curse on Atreus' descendents. According to Nietzsche, it was this "philosophy of the forest divinity [Silenus] and its mythic exemplifications" to which the "melancholy Etruscans" succumbed. (BT 3) As for the Greeks, they averted the pessimistic crisis by imaginatively enhancing existence in the beautiful world of the Olympian gods, a solution that held until the influx of Dionysian cultic practices summoned forth the repressed Silenian despair. (BT 4) Note how the notion of the pessimistic crisis plays into the picture of ancient Greek cultural history that Nietzsche rapidly traces out in the opening chapters of *BT*. Here we can ignore that picture's finer points and instead stress Nietzsche's functionalist thesis that *tragedy provides a solution* to the problem posed by the pessimistic crisis. This conception is the warrant for the often repeated claim that art – and tragic art, in particular – "rescues" the endangered Hellene from "a Buddhist denial of life." (BT 7)

But how exactly does this "rescue" occur and why is it art that provides the appropriate means to achieve it? To answer this question, it is useful to note how Nietzsche diagnoses the state of mind underlying the above-cited philosophical position of Anaximander. Anaximander, Nietzsche claims, treated the "self-consuming and self-negating multiplicity" that constitutes the world we live and suffer in as a "moral problem." For Anaximander, he continues, "existence is not justified (*gerechtfertigt*), but rather continuously atones for itself through its demise." In this remark we can discern an early formulation of Nietzsche's critique of morality, one of the most urgent themes of his mature philosophy. Moralization responds to the questionability of existence with aversion and negation; rather than providing a justification of existence in the face of suffering, it condemns existence as worthless, indeed, as worth less even than nothingness. But the critique of Anaximander also applies to the cognate views of Schopenhauer, for Schopenhauer likewise moralizes the suffering of existence, seeing, with Calderon, the very fact of birth as a sin to be atoned. Moreover, since Schopenhauer claims that just this moralized denial of the value of existence is the purport of tragedy, Nietzsche's critique of moralization – and, indeed, his entire understanding of the "danger" posed by the denial of existence – must entail an interpretation of the tragic art form antithetical to that articulated by Schopenhauer. Thus it is entirely consistent that Nietzsche's anti-pessimistic thesis on tragedy rests on the central notion of his Anaximander critique: the notion of the justification of existence. Perhaps the most infamous sentence in *BT* reads: "for only as an *aesthetic*

*phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified* [*gerechtfertigt*]”. This is Nietzsche’s functional definition of tragic art. Tragedy *justifies existence* and thus secures the continuation of individual and cultural life even in the face of life’s fundamental questionability. Once we grasp the significance of this sentence within the encompassing argument of *BT*, we can understand Nietzsche’s methodological insistence on a “purely aesthetic” analysis of tragedy referred to above. The point is that tragedy provides a justification of existence and thereby averts the threat of a denial of life *just because* it is an aesthetic phenomenon. Of course, claiming that this is so and demonstrating how it is actually achieved are two different things and we still have interpretive work to do to make Nietzsche’s claim even seem plausible.

To understand how tragedy produces justification in the special Nietzschean sense, we must bring his theory of the constitution of the tragic performance into view. This requires a discussion of the elusive concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the components of Nietzsche’s theory most responsible for *BT*’s renown. We may begin by asking – and this is a question seldom raised in treatments of the topic – to what genus the species designated by Nietzsche’s conceptual pair belong? The best answer to this question holds that the Apollonian and Dionysian are opposed tendencies of the imaginary. Indeed, it can be said that one of the achievements of *BT* and Nietzsche’s related writings is to develop an innovative theory of imaginative activity that identifies (and makes much of) a kinetic-corporeal aspect in addition to the traditional notion of image making. Moreover, Nietzsche’s theory is capacious. It considers physiological processes (A: dream vs. D: intoxication), predominant sense organs (A: eye vs. D: ear), affect (A: calm vs. D: ecstatic, but also depressive), socio-political tendency (A: hierarchy, measure, law vs. D: democracy, unity, transgression), and predominant artistic forms (A: sculpture, epic vs. D: music, dance). Thus, a concept of the imaginary comes into view that embraces the whole field of formative-expressive capacities; that takes shape in real-world contexts (bodies, media, actions); and that suffuses socio-cultural life. And Nietzsche’s breathtaking insight is that this entire complex field is structured by an *inner polarity*, precisely the opposition expressed by the divinities Apollo and Dionysus.

As regards the theory of tragedy in particular, the crucial aspect is the semiotic-communicative dimension. This is where the emphasis on medial specificity, exactly that feature that distinguishes Nietzsche’s theory

from plot-centered treatments of tragedy, comes to the fore. Again, a polar structure exhibits itself: an opposition between what I will call “presentation” on the Apollonian side and “mimesis” on the Dionysian side. Apollonian presentation is an *act of the subject* through which an object is *brought into presence* before one, a presence that is entirely self-sufficient (it refers to nothing beyond itself) and utterly intelligible. “We take pleasure,” Nietzsche writes in *BT*, “in the unmediated understanding of the configuration [*Gestalt*], all forms speak to us, there is nothing indifferent or unnecessary.” (*BT* 1) The Apollonian imaginary renders the world as fully transparent semblance (*Schein*), the significance of which is exhausted in its being-for-contemplation. There is a complicated story to tell about the relation that holds between Nietzsche’s inflection of the concept of semblance and the role that concept plays in the theories of Schiller and Hegel, but we must forego that discussion here. The point deserving emphasis is that the Apollonian imaginary preserves the distinction between subject and object, while dispensing with the needs, desires, and frustrations that ordinarily characterize that relationship. For the subject here is entirely a subject-of-contemplation just as the object has no other significance than its self-presentation. Hence the affective serenity, the self-control, the release from urgency and care, that are achieved within the Apollonian sphere. As far as the semiotic medium is concerned, the distinct sculptural image (*Bild*) provides the paradigm. The linguistic counterpart is the epic hexameter of Homer, which, through its pellucid syntactic-semantic articulation, brings forth a visually imagined world.

By contrast, Dionysian mimesis activates an altogether different experience of subjectivity. Nietzsche’s way of putting this is exuberant (a style appropriate to the evocation of the Dionysian), but nonetheless precise: “Man is no longer an artist, he has become an art work...” (*BT* 1) Whereas the Apollonian imaginary proceeds from an act of the creative subject and in the end secures individual self-awareness, in the Dionysian experience a kinetic process overwhelms the subject, carries it along, absorbing it within the ongoing dynamic. The term mimesis is to be understood here in the sense of contagious mimetic behavior: collective self-transformation. With an eye directed toward the frenetic character of ritual experience, Nietzsche notes that “Dionysian excitation” communicates to a “mass” of human beings the “artistic” capacity of seeing itself surrounded by a band of spirits “with which it knows itself to be one.” (*BT* 8) Then, in a brilliant conjecture, Nietzsche derives the “original form of drama” [*das dramatische Urphänomen*]

from this mimetic effervescence. “Here is something entirely different from the rhapsode, who doesn’t merge with his images [*Bildern*], but, like the painter, contemplates them outside himself; here there is already a yielding up of individuality through entry into an other nature. And as a matter of fact this phenomenon occurs epidemically: an entire crowd feels itself enchanted in this way.” (*BT* 8) Citizens of the polis collectively transformed into a band of Dionysus’ servants hallucinate, in their perfervid frenzy, the presence of their god: from this ecstatic throng the tragic chorus is born. The Aristotelian concept (representation of plot) has no grip here; *opsis* and *melos* are utterly indispensable. The Dionysian fervor is produced and sustained through a “total unleashing of the symbolic powers” of gesture, movement, and dance (*BT* 2) and tragedy is “born” in a pagan Pentecost as the “spirit of music” electrifies the ecstatic crowd.

The Dionysian imaginary consists not only of this energetic, ecstatic experience, but also includes a powerful depressive component, a sense of meaninglessness and despair at the world that emerges in the post-ecstatic state. The cessation of the intuited (hallucinated) oneness with the world leaves the human being bereft; affective investment in life is withdrawn. “As soon as everyday reality returns,” Nietzsche notes (speaking from his personal experience of Wagner’s music), “it is sensed as such with disgust; an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of those [ecstatic, self-forgetting] conditions.” And it is in this state, Nietzsche continues, that “Dionysian man” understands the “wisdom of the forest god Silenus.” The terror and absurdity of being “disgusts [*ekelt*] him.” (*BT* 7) Interpreters of *BT* who see in the Dionysian only a positive factor, jubilantly affirmed by Nietzsche, are off the mark. Spawned in the bed of post-ecstatic depression, Dionysian “wisdom” or “philosophy,” as Nietzsche sometimes calls it, is an essentially life-denying attitude. In short, the Dionysian is the source (or a source) of the pessimistic crisis that, on Nietzsche’s argument, the tragedy overcomes.

This brings us back to Nietzsche’s functionalist argument, which we are now equipped fully to understand. Reduced to its skeletal outline, Nietzsche’s claim is twofold:

- a) The tragedy, due to its rootedness in Dionysian experience, transposes both the frenetic and the pessimistic strains of the Dionysian into artistic form. Thus, in contrast to the Apollonian

enhancement of existence in the radiant world of the Olympians, the tragedy does not force the Dionysian-Silenian imaginary underground, but instead brings it to the fore and provides a space for its controlled expenditure [*Entladung*].

b) The artistic form in question constitutes a delicate equipoise – a controlled strife – of the Apollonian and the Dionysian imaginaries, each enriching the other while holding the other in check. This formal achievement exhibits the structural character of play [*Spiel*].

The pessimistic crisis is overcome by bringing the most radical form of negativity imaginable – the Silenian denial of the value of existence – into the complexion of an artistic form that *exhibits being as play*. Exactly this is what is meant by the “justification of existence and the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.” It is, in Nietzsche’s view, the cultural achievement of tragedy. Its philosophical analogue is to be found in the fragments of Heraclitus.

The achievement was short-lived. Soon a non-tragic view, in which “existence appeared as fully intelligible and therefore as justified,” (*BT* 15) would assume cultural predominance. This is another thread in the story *BT* unfolds: the narrative of the Socratic spectator and his ally Euripides. Their historical deed is to have brought about the death of tragedy and to have inaugurated the era of theoretical man.

[See also Aristotle; Burckhardt; Hegel; Hölderlin; Imagination; Katharsis; Mimesis; Schopenhauer; Tragedy]

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