

Who was Nietzsche? The notion that we know him would have nauseated him. Indeed, there is much that most people do not know. He hated knockwurst, for instance, and know-it-alls. He expressed distaste for even the most venerable German thinkers who belched, winded long or wheezed. Completely indebted to Hegel's Romantic genius, he was given to criticizing the Hegelian style of thinking, with its teleology, its weighty Himalayan abstractions, and its aftertaste of a late Christian heresy. Nietzsche claimed to be too sensitive for that, too sensible to be serious, too reasonable to be rationalist—an anti-Saxon, all-too-human *Gesamtkunstwerk* who believed the truest truths were contradictions (which themselves had to be overcome by Nietzsche). He proclaimed himself an antidote not only to the lessons of his masters, but to the traditional cultural and scholarly common sense of his age, which he defined as a common stomach ailment.

Ironically, if appositely, Nietzsche got his start in philology, a field of systemic study based partly on the assumption that a look into the life of ancient cultures is best obtained by the dissection of dead languages. This premise was part taxidermy in Nietzsche's mind, but the discipline of philology (this methodic, *lento* art, he called it in *The Dawn*) served as both medium and impetus for his rebellious cultural agenda. Though he later underplayed his debt to academia and all former idols, Nietzsche became—at twenty-four—the youngest scholar ever to hold a professorship at Basel. At this time, he also struck up a friendship with the composer Richard Wagner, one of the most spectacular artistic presences of the age. Wagner became Nietzsche's Meister and father figure. He also shared Nietzsche's love of Schopenhauer, the great post-Romantic philosopher of gloom. No sooner, however, had Nietzsche's academic career taken off than it was downed by the unfavorable public reception of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

Again ironically, Nietzsche claims he formulated this seminal work of dramatic theory while serving in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, a conflict shrewdly instigated by Bismarck of Prussia. Nietzsche later referred to himself as essentially apolitical; but in his

youth, under the spell of Wagner and Stendhal's hero Julien Sorel (who, in *The Red and the Black*, fancies himself a Napoleon but proves to be as much a monastic at heart), Nietzsche seems to have harbored aristocratic and nationalist notions of honor. Though he came home with terrible nervous illnesses and grew to deplore imperial and bourgeois expediency as a waste of external energy at the expense of internal worth, his early nationalism is still evident in the last ten sections of *The Birth of Tragedy* and may partially account for his decision to temper his flare for iconoclastic leaps with some dutiful continuity. Of all Nietzsche's enduring books, *The Birth of Tragedy* is one of the very few that are not broken into quasi-disjunctive aphorisms.

Nietzsche's effort to reconcile his iconoclasm with his nationalism also informs the purport of the text. While Nietzsche waged war with conventional ideas about the Greeks, he hoped to win a correlative victory for German culture, which he had likened to a "wax museum." He boldly assaulted Aristotle's didactic and cathartic notion of Greek tragedy. The whole culture of "nothing in excess" was suspect. Nietzsche believed this model derived from a late and decadent Socratic phase of Greek culture. In opposition, he claimed to have *dis*-covered the early *musical* Greeks, the *original* artists in multiple senses of the word. The philosopher-artist's life of re-evaluation had begun. Then again, his special pleading for Wagner as the Aeschylus, the great Greek tragedian of modern Germany, later stuck him as the embarrassing product of delusional idolatry. The mature Nietzsche was also given to bouts of self-pitying nostalgia for aristocratic "Greek" and Florentine arcadias, moods that may still mark him, for all his love of iconoclasm, as a bit of a cranky, sentimental post-Romantic.

Most notably, though, Nietzsche's style of thinking is multi-dimensional. That he conceived the chorus of Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy* as not only historic but also archetypal (even, to use anachronistic terms, proto-Jungian and proto-Freudian), is something his contemporaries should not have been expected to grasp. Nietzsche's Dionysus principle also defines abstract antagonism, formless frenzy *contra* constructed Apollonian restraint. The stable Apollonian mode of expression, associated with sculpture and dialogue, and the ecstatic Dionysian, associated with music and dance,

nevertheless originate in the same place, defining a creative fusion which itself moves *contra* science. Despite his ostensible call for balance, Nietzsche clearly seems to favor the Dionysian half of this dialectic, almost to the point of suggesting a biographical metonym for his own artistic persona. The Dionysian also recalls Schopenhauer's conception of the insatiable will, which Nietzsche, unlike his predecessor, seeks not to renounce but to affirm. The Dionysian, by this account, suggests Nietzsche's conscious re-conception of the creative drive. It even prefigures the underlying daemon-prophet, the convention-destroying phoenix of self-overcoming who later gives birth to *Zarathustra* and Nietzsche's maddening post-philosophy.

In 1889, Nietzsche the Dionysian went authentically mad. In January of that year, at the sight of a horse being beaten, he broke down weeping and threw his arms around its neck. This incident uncannily recalls Raskolnikov's nightmare in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, a new novel which the philosopher—who claimed to see mostly fatal defects in the literary canon—greatly admired. Nietzsche went home, dashed off bizarre, totally incomprehensible letters to old colleagues, and signed them "Dionysus." He spent his last eleven years as an invalid in the care of his ultra-nationalistic, anti-Semitic sister, a fate which, had he foreseen it in his active life, he would certainly have taken measures to prevent.

Though Nietzsche has been read as a Romantic, a positivist, an existentialist, and even a sentimentalist, no school can claim him wholly. He was too purposive to be a nihilist, but he believed so deeply in opposition that his stance was never secure. Paganizing Kant in *The Birth of Tragedy*, for instance, he states that empirical reality is illusory and that dreams define the higher truth. This move already defies common sense and marks him as a proto-psychologist. Homer's epic frieze, that stylized, almost sculpted dream of the gods of the people, is therefore doubly redeeming for being the illusion of an illusion. But if this formally articulated realm is what Nietzsche also deems commensurate with the "Apollonian" world of spoken drama, he already predicates a radical stage before Dionysus re-enters from his formless musical source, transforming primal suffering into tragic dithyrambs of praise. The Dionysian and the Apollonian

contain each other, each as if locked in an eternally churning balance of power. Still, Nietzsche would later reject this very schema as smelling offensively of Hegel. If both Nietzsche's material and his accounts of it take on the reversals of a drama in verse, do we read his inversions (of empiricism, the wisdom of Silenus, the fate of Germany) as stylistic turns *and* visionary insights? The work can be enjoyed for the drama of its movement alone.

At the same time, *The Birth of Tragedy* can appear down-to-earth and prescriptive. It is reasonable to infer that the originally mythopoeic and always agonistic 5th-century Greeks sought to give voice to inner spiritual disclosures in ritual tragedy. As their myths of intergenerational violence suggest, they sought to sublimate an appetitive, competitive unease into art even as they upheld a certain regard for the *status quo*. Drama played a critical role in the political and religious lives of the Athenians, but the balance they dramatized was never a stable one. Their art was fueled by confrontation with the underlying suffering that for them defined the human condition, and Nietzsche insists that the Greeks embraced the sorrow and terror. They ecstatically affirmed the agony of a this-worldly life. Dionysus was no afterworld deity, but one of the theater itself and of mortal liquids such as sap, semen and blood. Still, Nietzsche argues, this ritual of self-confrontation simultaneously entailed a collective form of psychic redemption. After all, Athenian actors wore grotesque, stylized masks, and they never subscribed to merely "realist" renditions of lives mundanely lived. If the Greek tragedians rendered their greatest early wisdom in choral song, Nietzsche also has prescriptive reasons for insisting that their audience surrendered itself in a kind of *participation mystique*. Is not this call for primordial Oneness precisely what is missing from specialized late 19th century "machinery"? For Nietzsche to "prove" his point by getting mired in scholarly or naturalist-sounding details about an antiquity we can know only through politically and critically tendentious accounts would conflict with the creative "truth" of his statement. Nietzsche poses an insoluble dilemma. His poetic scholarship makes a case for itself.

This unusual style of scholarship was applauded, but for Nietzsche, only posthumously. While he lived, Nietzsche's more traditional colleagues dubbed his work

"Ass-Philology" or the bizarre ravings of an opera composer's lackey, and even some of his former friends found it ridiculous. Nietzsche accordingly turned from both Wagnerian nationalism and the sterile halls of academia at Basel. By the 1880's, for all his trenchant Oscar Wilde-like wit on the page, he had also become the intellectual Van Gogh, self-exiled, writing in a garret, eminently unknown, accompanied by only insomnia, dysentery, parblindness, violently protracted migraines, and syphilis (we do not know how he contracted it). "The barrel of a revolver," he wrote in a postcard to a rare remaining confidant, "is actually a very calming thought for me right now." In keeping with the Dionysian spirit of his conception of tragedy, his style grew even more brilliantly self-amused and paradoxical.

Nietzsche's late "Attempt at a Self-Criticism"(1886) reflects this trend. If *The Birth of Tragedy* presented the empirical world as one plane in a more comprehensive art-universe, for example, how could Nietzsche now claim that he *could* have argued exclusively on that plane (as a philologist) or otherwise "sung" his beliefs entirely as a poet? We should be careful: Nietzsche's self-mocking voice here doubly implicates his critics. *The Birth of Tragedy* was, he says, "a proven book, by which I mean it was good enough for 'the best minds of the day.' Accordingly it should be treated with discreet silence on my part." Here he mocks as much as compliments what were his most receptive readers, and by implication, himself and us.

From the start, all this wonderful ironic artistry reflects a precocious belief in what we might now call high modernist aesthetics. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Art is not just a Kantian end-in-itself in a world ruled by putatively rational, moral imperatives. Art is defined as both Being and reason-for-being, a godless purpose for existence that entails aesthetic, emotive and intellectual self-immolation. This "anti-Christian"— by which Nietzsche means a new form of "pre-Christian"— kind of martyrdom prefigures what W.B. Yeats would call the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor of the early Greek stage, a stage allegedly at one with the rising Helicon of the modern mind. Nietzsche's omnivorous eponymous Olympus could accordingly be said to include a hierarchy of aesthetic rankings. Wagner was first placed at the Apollo-Dionysian apex. Nietzsche later

dubbed him a *base* force who belonged beneath the tragic stage, in the immobile *base* with Christian ascetics, Socratic rationalists, bourgeois democrats, Marxists, pessimists, optimists, and other "life-denying" types: those who disregard the profoundly subtle, cuttingly ironic tensions of the surface for simplistic, conformist, or pedantic claims to the mere depths.

In the end, the elitist Nietzsche has reservations about everyone, Nietzsche included. Still, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, his idols define values in their twilight, not yet revalued. Out of deference for Schopenhauer, Wagner, and the philologists, the philosopher-poet keeps his relish for stylistic and visionary transports in line, even as we ponder how his sequence of topics (art, metaphysics, Greece, Wagner) and technical pastiche (intuition, metaphor, allusion, quotation) are redeemed by their Gestalt. Arguably, though his scholarly "we" (the first word in the work) quickly turns into his more lyrical "I," Nietzsche's final effort at conventional cohesion makes some degree of "Apollonian composure" possible, balancing his Dionysian lightning more consistently than do the blackouts in the treacherous if thrilling electrical storm that was to follow.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Dannhauser, Werner J. *Nietzsche's View of Socrates*. Cornell University Press, 1974.

Contains a helpful chapter on *The Birth of Tragedy*.

De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading*. Yale University Press, 1979. A thorough deconstructive reading of the text.

Dodd, E.R. *The Greeks and The Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951. The dark side of the Greeks.

Euripides. "The Bacchae" Trans. Donald Sutherland. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968. Includes commentary.

Hollingdale, R. J. *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965. Mostly biographical.

Kaufmann, Walter. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. NY: Meridian Books, 1956. Translations and biographical information.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks." Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1962. Nietzsche's early essay on the pre-Socratics throws light on *The Birth of Tragedy*.

ALTERNATE TRANSLATIONS OF *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*:

Walter Kaufmann. NY: Vintage Books, Random House, 1967.

Shaun Whiteside. NY: Penguin Books, 1993.