Review of “The Birth of Tragedy”

Robert Luyster
University of Connecticut

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Few books in order to be understood properly have to be reinserted into their historical, cultural and personal context as crucially as does Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT). A mere account of its themes does not begin to explain the meaning of the book to its author, his contemporaries or later generations. Nietzsche had been trained as a classical philologist and thanks to his reputation as the most brilliant young student in the field, was made a professor at the University of Basel even before being awarded his doctorate. Everyone expected this, his first book, to be a triumph, the first of many in his career. But instead it provoked a storm throughout the scholarly world, was almost universally condemned, and effectively ended Nietzsche’s scholarly career at its very commencement. How could he have gone so wrong so quickly? What could he have been thinking?

Nietzsche was willing to risk being a failure as a philologist because success in that field was the least of his ambitions. Not historical correctness but the deeper truth that lay beneath history – classical or otherwise – and culture as its creative source was the focus of his very impassioned and wide-ranging inquiry. This was ostensibly a book about the origins of Greek tragedy as an art form, but Nietzsche’s passion for the genuine source of all phenomena immediately led him beyond a narrow, conservative approach to his material and instead into a quasi-metaphysical plunge into the subterranean forces that mold all art and creativity. It can scarcely be surprising today that the very audacity of his thinking, regardless of its consequences, would have been radically unacceptable to his traditionalistic colleagues. His reflections on the evolution of Attic art forms were influenced far more by the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Hegel and the operatic achievement and theories of (his friend and mentor) Richard Wagner than by his immediate scholarly predecessors. As a result, it was publication of this book in 1872, at the very beginning of his career, that for all practical purposes ended it and made him an academic outcaste.

At the time of his writing experts on Greek culture agreed that it marked the supreme expression of human artistic achievement, the heights of the possibilities of human nature for rational ordering of its destiny and its world. Goethe was foremost among those who celebrated its “noble simplicity, calm grandeur,” while Matthew Arnold later epitomized it in a phrase now become famous as pure “sweetness and light.” Nietzsche freely acknowledged that the rationalistic component of human nature reached supreme form in classical Greece; his originality, however, was to insist that behind it and opposing it stood another equally powerful component, the human capacity for irrationality. Nor was he prepared to insist that the latter must always be prepared to submit to the claims and mastery of reason and control, for he saw as few had before him the creative and positive potential of the orgiastic to culture and
growth. In these ways *BT* may appropriately be read as one of the harbingers of the irrationalism that characterizes the perspective of such twentieth-century icons as Freud, as well as the savagery of the World Wars that destroyed the idolatry of reason by the middle of the century.

Within the classical context of his analysis Nietzsche is prompted to term man’s rationalistic energies “Apollonian” and their contrary “Dionysian.” He describes their confrontation as one of “tremendous opposition,” but nevertheless one that is capable of reconciliation, regarding classical Greek tragedy as a foremost example of such a synthesis. Nietzsche proposes that each may best be understood as a manifestation of specific types of human experience, notably dreaming and frenzy. Apollo, the god of reason and restraint, may be regarded as the patron of form: in the first place the forms spontaneously generated in dreams, but in a larger sense individual form as such, and even the individual as such – individuation. But it is in this very fragmentation of “this basis of all existence – the Dionysian substratum of the world” (91) that is responsible for the “Dionysian suffering” that characterizes all existence: men are irrevocably separated from each other and from their eternal source. The Dionysian rituals that are incorporated in later forms of Attic drama incorporate and commemorate this sacrificial tearing apart of their sponsor, Dionysus.

How is it then that the Greeks, who “knew and felt the terror and horror of existence” (8) long before Christianity’s faith in salvation through Jesus Christ proposed to obviate such fears, did not succumb to the depths of pessimism about life? It was only, Nietzsche contends, by turning to Apollo, the representative of “the primordial joy of appearance” (14), the god of beautiful illusions, that they were enabled not merely to survive but to celebrate the joyousness of being. “I feel myself impelled to the metaphysical assumption that the Truly-Existent and Primal Unity, eternally suffering and divided against itself, has need of the rapturous vision, the joyful appearance, for its continuous salvation” (10). In *BT* art and the experience of beauty replaces religion as the means by which man’s being may be affirmed.

The arguments in sections 1-10 of *BT* summarize Nietzsche’s analysis of the development and significance of Greek tragedy. In sections 11-15 he turns to equally provocative and stimulating theses regarding its decline in the Hellenistic period. Its decadence, he argues, is to be laid at the feet of Euripides, Socrates and the Socratic rationalists, those who could no longer appreciate, dignify or ennable the tragedy inherent in life, but who – oblivious to the ineluctability of human suffering – believed naively in the ability of theoretical reason to comprehend and somehow solve practically the pain inherent in existence. They believed that through the knowledge derived from the arguments and counter-arguments of rigorous rational dialectic the harsh realities of existence could somehow be avoided or eliminated. They blindly trusted “the Socratic maxims: ‘Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy’” (50). Finally, in the naïve, superficial optimism of the period, emphasizing reason only in its technical, utilitarian uses, while refusing to consider the obdurate realities of life, Nietzsche finds the ancestor of the scientism of modern period, equally prepared to believe that there must be a technological fix to all sources of human suffering. The solution for such resolute blindness, Nietzsche claims, can only lie in the regeneration of an authentic art, the cultivation of a courage in which a “new form of insight rises to view, namely tragic perception, which in order merely to be endured, requires art as protection and remedy” (55).

Nietzsche later added ten additional sections (16-25) to these fifteen. In the Translator’s Introduction to his own translation of the *BT*, Walter Kaufmann accurately refers to them as “less worthy of Nietzsche than anything else of comparable length he ever published” (13). They cover once again much of the ground already surveyed in the previous version of the book, but in a very much more diffuse, confusing
and aimless manner. Their principal purpose was to exalt German culture generally and in particular Nietzsche’s principal enthusiasm at this time, his older friend, composer Richard Wagner, as the particular expression of the regeneration of authentic art that he had called for in the conclusion of section 15. In these he finds “the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit in our modern world!” (72). The work as a whole is dedicated to Wagner, with whom he would shortly break over the latter’s embrace of nationalistic, Christian and anti-Semitic ideologies.

This edition by Dover Publications is a reproduction of one of the earliest English translations of Nietzsche’s *BT*, that of Clifton Fadiman, an American man-of-letters who was only a graduate student in New York when commissioned to undertake the work (released in 1927). It’s principal recommendation is its cost – only $1. As a translation, however, it is quite defensible; indeed, in the Notes preceding his edition, Kaufmann acknowledges his close dependence on the Fadiman version. Nevertheless, for those prepared to spend only a little extra, the Kaufmann edition is much preferable. It appends not only Nietzsche’s last thoughts on Wagner, *The Case of Wagner*, published just before his death, but even more importantly Kaufmann’s very useful Introduction and Nietzsche’s own “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” written by him some fifteen years later, in which he takes issue with many of his own most fundamental claims in *BT*.

For some decades students of Nietzsche, such as Kaufmann, R. J. Hollingdale, Richard Schacht, Gilles Deleuze and many others, have been relatively certain about the significance of his claims in the *BT*, and in particular the contrast between the meaning of the Dionysian in that and succeeding works. For nearly all scholars its discontinuity with Nietzsche’s later philosophical themes has been axiomatic, but more recently that certainty has been challenged. Like myself, James I. Porter (“The Invention of Dionysus and the Platonic Midwife: Nietzsche’s ‘Birth of Tragedy,’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 33, 3 [July, 1995], 467-97) also argues the need for a fresh interpretation of *BT*. And like myself, Porter wishes to soften the contrast between *BT* and Nietzsche’s subsequent writings; but whereas he is inclined to read *BT* in the light of Nietzsche’s later thinking, I argue (“Nietzsche/Dionysus: Ecstasy, Heroism and the Monstrous,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 21 [Spring, 2001], 1-26) for the reverse: that the dualism of *BT* between the Apollonian and the Dionysian continues to inform Nietzsche’s thought throughout his writings. Far from being an anomaly in the early Nietzsche, confined to this volume alone, it pervades his thinking as a whole.

Additionally, and as importantly, the standard scholarly understanding of the Dionysian in *BT* has been skewed almost entirely towards the negative. The received account repeats endlessly Nietzsche’s notion that the dismemberment of the Dionysian core of being leads to the concept of the Dionysian as synonymous with suffering. What it consistently ignores is Nietzsche’s equal insistence here and elsewhere upon Dionysian ecstasy, an element in his thought whose implications are seldom acknowledged. In a sample passage that is seldom quoted, Nietzsche asserts that “Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them. We are to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence – yet we are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the transforming figures…. We have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence…. In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose creative joy we are united” (60).
In this last statement Nietzsche’s often cited metaphysical assumption that the primal cosmic unity is eternally suffering and contradictory is temporarily abrogated, for he now affirms a quite opposite metaphysical assumption: that the primal state of all existing beings is not suffering at all but ecstasy. By means of Dionysian art (most particularly music, especially Wagnerian music) we are enabled to gain access to this aboriginal ecstasy of existence; via its rituals we are enabled to go behind phenomena, to have direct access to their – to our own – metaphysical source. “In [Dionysian] song and dance man... feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy...” (4). Through Dionysian tragedy “the gulf between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature. The metaphysical comfort – with which, as I have here intimated, every true tragedy leaves us – [reveals] that despite the flux of phenomena, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (22).

Soon after *BT*, Nietzsche will come to reject the possibility of a Dionysian or any other explicit form of metaphysics, but throughout his thought he never comes to doubt the core metaphysical intuition upon which it is based, the deepest essence of the Dionysian experience itself: that whatever the sufferings of the individual life, the core of being consists in ecstasy, some aboriginal and invincible joy. It comes to constitute for Nietzsche the unanswerable objection to Schopenhauer and all other forms of pessimism and the basis for his lifelong dedication to the affirmation of life. What was more problematic was whether the essence of that pleasure consisted in (the Dionysian of *BT*) mystical immersion in nature, or, on the contrary, the personal exercise of power over weaker others – sketched originally in the aesthetic creativity of the artist-hero of *BT* (there dubbed Apollonian), but thereafter in the will-to-power of the Higher-Man (*Uebermensch*; now, confusingly, also described as Dionysian) in various modalities of culture.

Throughout Nietzsche’s philosophy subsequent to *BT* he continued to consider the Dionysian and Apollonian “energies,” but with vastly more confusion, for henceforth both respond to the banner of Dionysus. After *BT*, that is, the name “Apollo” – though by no means the notions, values and attitudes based on conflict that he represented; i.e., the heroic negation of the negation of the world itself – is abandoned and Dionysus, at first the epitome of the experience of ecstatic union with the innermost depths of the world, is alone made to symbolize both contraries in the relation. But this is done without the overt recognition that we found in *BT*: that they are contraries; that the state between them is one, as Nietzsche originally phrased it, of “tremendous opposition.” The cost of this external philosophical unification (Kaufmann describes the result as the “monism of the will to power”), however, was serious philosophical ambivalence and obscurity at the heart of his thinking.

Robert Luyster

University of Connecticut

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