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The Death of Tragedy: Examining Nietzsche's Return to the Greeks

Brian Long

Thesis Introduction

In the study of philosophy, there are many dichotomies: Eastern philosophy versus Western philosophy, analytic versus continental, and so on. But none of these is as fundamental as the struggle between the ancients and the moderns. With the writings of Descartes, and perhaps even earlier with those of Machiavelli, there was a transition from “man in the world” to “man above the world.” Plato’s dialogues, Aristotle’s lecture notes, and the verses of the pre-Socratics are abandoned for having the wrong focus. No longer did philosophers seek to observe and question nature and man’s place in it; now the goal was mastery and possession of nature. There is no longer a question of man’s place in the world; he is above it simply because he is who he is. All that remains for humanity is to discover the facts of nature in order to make them subject to the human will.

Philosophy today must confront the distinction between ancients and moderns in many ways. Is it an accurate description of the history of philosophy, or is it an oversimplification? If this is an accurate description, were the right choices made by modern philosophers, or was the focus on nature and man’s place in it a better object of pursuit for philosophy? If the distinction between the ancients and the moderns is an oversimplification, what can be done to better understand the history of philosophy and the progress of thought?

Nietzsche presents a theory of history which is very useful in resolving this dilemma. In his essay titled *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, he proposes that history, and by extension the history of philosophy, is only valuable if it is useful: “Only so far as history serves life will we serve it” (*History* 7). It can be useful or useless depending upon how we interpret it. According to Nietzsche, usefulness for life is the only valid reason for studying history. However, this idea has given way to the idea that history should become a science,

placing objective truth over usefulness. This is harmful to life, since “Knowledge, taken in excess without hunger, even contrary to need, no longer acts as a transforming motive impelling to action” (*History* 24). Prizing knowledge over action is harmful for life, but this doesn’t faze modern man, since now “history is honoured above life” (*History* 41).

This is a problem for Nietzsche, who claims that all of history is simply based upon different interpretations, which he calls horizons. Furthermore, this interpretation is necessary, since “if one robs [a living thing] of this veil...then one should not wonder about its rapidly becoming withered, hard and barren” (*History* 40). Every living thing has a veil of some sort; Nietzsche likens it to the atmosphere of a star, being necessary for life. One can certainly abandon a certain veil in favor of another, but nothing can exist entirely without a veil. Thus, a focus on knowledge and objective historical fact is a misguided focus, since all history is an interpretation.

Nietzsche writes about three different historical horizons. They are the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical horizons, and they correspond to a person, respectively, “so far as he is active and striving, so far as he preserves and admires, and so far as he suffers and is in need of liberation” (*History* 14). He characterizes the monumental horizon as the one to whom “history belongs above all” (*History* 14). The monumental horizon can be useful for life; those who aspire to greatness can look at great figures in the past for inspiration and a “knowledge that the great which once existed was at least *possible* once and may well again be possible sometime” (*History* 16). Those who see history in this way have goals and use history to aid them.

There is, however, another side to the monumental horizon. In order for it to be used effectively, “how much that is different must be overlooked, how ruthlessly must the

individuality of the past be forced into a general form and have all its sharp edges broken for the sake of agreement” (*History* 16). In order to find similarities between an historical figure or event and any present situation, one must be incredibly disloyal to the historical events. One must literally break the past in order to use it in this way.

The antiquarian sees the past as something to be revered simply because it is in the past. This horizon serves life in its desire to preserve the past for the future. However, this is a very limited servitude. Like the monumental man, the antiquarian has a goal, but unlike the monumental man, his goal struggles against growth in a desire to maintain stasis. Nietzsche is quick to point out the flaws of the antiquarian horizon, since:

the time will finally come when everything old and past which has not totally been lost sight of will simply be taken as equally venerable, while whatever does not approach the old with veneration, that is, the new and growing, will be rejected and treated with hostility (*History* 20).

Since the only facet of the antiquarian horizon is veneration of the past, there is no way to evaluate it. Everything from the past must be equally important and treasured. As a consequence, the present, which promotes change, is rejected by the antiquarian. This is clearly problematic. It is also an extreme of example of this horizon. The antiquarian horizon could perhaps be more useful for life, especially if it were combined with the third horizon.

The third horizon, the critical, is useful for life, but is not subservient to it. The critical horizon is used when humanity needs to destroy some part of the past in order to survive. One does this by “dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it” (*History* 21). It is important to note that the judge for the past is not justice, but the necessities of life, according to the ones judging. Whatever needs to be condemned for life to continue will be condemned. There is no focus on any sense of objective truth. What the judges see as necessary for life is victorious, and what is not is discarded.

It is important to address one of the most common Nietzschean topics here, namely the role of nihilism in his thought. This is an often-debated term, with many definitions. The original definition refers to “an expression of anarchy and revolutionary political opposition to the established order.”¹ However, since the term’s apparent origin in 19th century Russia, its meaning has developed to encompass a more general denial of all value. Is Nietzsche a nihilist? The answer is “both yes and no: yes, if nihilism means the denial of traditional belief systems; no, if it means the denial of any value, meaning or truth in the world.”² Nietzsche is very willing to upend traditional belief systems; he calls for a “revaluation of all values.”³ However, he does not deny the value of life. On the contrary, his philosophy is *for life*. In analyzing these horizons which he has set up, it is clear that Nietzsche is not a nihilist. In fact, he would see nihilism as something quite dangerous. He advocates for history to be used in service to life. He is essentially life-affirming, whereas nihilism is life-denying. It is understandable why one might think of him as a nihilist; in speaking about the critical horizon, he does advocate for tearing down the past, but he does so only when tearing down the past is useful for life. This is not the work of a nihilist.

Nietzsche analyzes the distinction between ancients and moderns under this framework. He sees a fundamental difference between the two, and he explores this in *The Birth of Tragedy* by examining the Greeks with the monumental horizon. He looks specifically at Attic tragedy, which he sees as a perfected art form. This perfection is due to the balance between the two powers that Nietzsche believes control art: the powers of Apollo and of Dionysus. He sees something desirable in this balance and tries to pinpoint it in order to reclaim it for modernity. As discussed, the primary element of the monumental horizon is a use of the past to achieve

¹ Hatab 1987:91

² *Ibid.*, 92

³ Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist*

greatness in the present. However, there is a secondary element, which is the inaccuracy of the monumental horizon. By only viewing past figures or cultures for what is useful or great about them, the viewer loses much of what defines the figure or culture. Nietzsche's monumental view of the Greeks falls into this paradigm; his Greeks are a construct.

Nietzsche has a very romantic view of the Greeks. This can be seen in his account of Attic tragedy presented in *The Birth of Tragedy*. His first inaccuracy is conflating ancient Greece with Athens, and applying to "the Greeks" certain qualities which he derives from an analysis of tragedy in Athens. To apply to every Athenian the traits that he uncovers in *Birth* would be an oversimplification, but he goes beyond this and applies it to all Greeks. Near the end of the work, Nietzsche remarks that:

People feel shame and fear in the face of the Greeks—unless there be one individual who reveres truth above all else and is therefore able to admit even this truth to himself: that the Greeks are chariot-drivers who hold the reins of our culture, and every other culture, in their hands, yet the chariot and the horses are almost always made of too-puny stuff and unequal to the glory of their drivers, who then regard it as a joke to drive such a vehicle into the abyss—and then jump across it themselves with the leap of Achilles (*BT* 72).

This claim seems far too bold to describe the actual culture of the various ancient Greek city-states. Nietzsche admits that his depiction is hard to accept. This is at least in part due to the fact that acceptance of Nietzsche's claim requires *action*, as every monumental horizon does. He demands a return to the Greeks.

At this point, we run into a serious problem. The monumental horizon is supposed to spur us into action, strengthened by the "knowledge that the great which once existed was at least *possible once*" (*History* 16). And yet, greatness did not inevitably characterize everything Greek. It is a construct, at least in part. We are therefore confronted with the following question: How can we return to the Greeks if they never existed? I will argue that this return is impossible, not

solely on the basis of the difficulties presented by the monumental horizon, but due also to the role Euripides played in the death of tragedy. His search for rational knowledge at the expense of the Silenic wisdom destroyed the balance that existed in Greek art in an irreparable way. This is the death of tragedy: by forcing reasoned criticism onto the stage, the balance between Apollo and Dionysus is overthrown. With this done, the distinction between the ancients and the moderns is born, and we who come after tragedy's death are left inescapably on the side of the moderns.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how necessary the balance between Apollo and Dionysus is, how it exists in tragedy, and how it is destroyed. In my first chapter, I will discuss the Apolline and Dionysian powers, giving some background on Apollo and Dionysus. I will then explore the struggle between the two powers, noting the specific role of the Silenic wisdom. In the second chapter, I will examine several tragedies in light of these two powers, culminating in a discussion of Euripides' *Bacchae*. This discussion will demonstrate how the Apolline and Dionysiac powers were at work on the tragic stage, how they were balanced, and how that balance was destroyed.

Chapter One: Apolline and Dionysiac Powers

Nietzsche begins *The Birth of Tragedy* with what he sees as the central theme of art: the conflict between the Apolline and Dionysiac powers. This struggle is first described as being “between the Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos” (BT 14). It is a relationship that is described as monstrous.⁴ As a result of continual clashing together, through what Nietzsche calls a “metaphysical miracle,” Attic tragedy is born (BT 14). However, before discussing the conflict between these two powers, it is first necessary to explore the gods behind them.

Apollo is the son of Zeus and Leto and the twin brother of Artemis. He is described in the *Homeric Hymns* as “Ἀπόλλωνος ἐκάτοιο,” “far-shooting Apollo.”⁵ Apollo’s hymn is traditionally divided into two sections, the first dedicated to Delian Apollo and the second to Pythian Apollo.⁶ In this first section, the focus of the hymn is on Leto and her search for a place to bear her children. No place is willing except the island of Delos. Upon his birth, Apollo declares, “εἶη μοι κίθαρίς τε φίλη καὶ καμπύλα τόξα, / χρήσω δ’ ἀνθρώποισι Διὸς νημερτέα βουλήν,” “The lyre and the curved bow shall ever be dear to me, and I will declare to men the unflinching will of Zeus.”⁷ The hymn to Pythian Apollo focuses on his gift of the lyre, and how he “Μοῦσαι μὲν θ’ ἅμα πᾶσαι ἀμειβόμεναι ὀπι καλῆ / ὕμνευσίν ῥα θεῶν δῶρ’ ἄμβροτα ἠδ’ ἀνθρώπων / τλημοσύνας, ὅσ’ ἔχοντες ὑπ’ ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι” “and all the Muses together, voice sweetly answering voice, hymn the unending gifts the gods enjoy and the suffering of men, all that they endure at the hands of the deathless gods.”⁸ From these two passages, Apollo’s primary domains are clear: he is lord of music and archery, and he sings of the glory of the gods and the

⁴ Sallis 1991:14

⁵ Evelyn-White 1914:III. For this text, hymn numbers will be used instead of pages.

⁶ For a discussion on the question of unity in the hymn to Apollo, see Chappell, 2011.

⁷ Evelyn-White 1914:III

⁸ *Ibid.*, 182-206

suffering of men. Already a path can be traced from here to tragedy, in recounting the sufferings of men.

Apollo has many areas of influence, from music and poetry to healing and archery, but his most important role, both in tragedy, and in Greek society as a whole, is as a god of prophecy. His oracle at Delphi stood at the center of the Greek world, both geographically and socially. Within tragedy, his role can be summarized simply, yet powerfully: “Apollo’s words give rise to actions.”⁹ The Delphic oracle is not consulted for trivialities or abstract philosophical queries. It is consulted when there is no other option. Orestes consults Apollo when his mother kills his father. Oedipus consults Apollo when Thebes is struck with a plague. When something must be done, but there is no clear path, the god is consulted to provide a sense of direction. While often inscrutable, the words from Delphi are never spoken in vain: “When the oracle is given prominence, the power of the 'far-shooting' Apollo is made to feel particularly close, even dangerously close in some cases.”¹⁰ While not often providing clarity, Apollo gives enough for *action*. As Heraclitus says, “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign” (Heraclitus 33). He speaks in a way that points in a direction, one which must be taken.

Before turning to Nietzsche and his “image-making god” it will be useful to examine a source that confronts him (*BT* §1). Nietzsche defends his title for Apollo by referencing his role as “the god of all image-making energies, Apollo is also the god of prophecy...[and] the god of light; as such, he also governs the lovely semblance produced by the inner world of fantasy” (*BT* §1). There are those who see Nietzsche’s use of Apollo in this regard as a blatant and willing

⁹ Kavoulaki 2009:244

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 231

misinterpretation of who he was to the Greeks.¹¹ Sallis, on the other hand defends Nietzsche's portrayal of Apollo. He critiques those who claim Nietzsche lacked philological precision: "What is more objectionable is the way in which such charges tacitly involve a reduction of the structure of Nietzsche's discourse, as though it were simply a matter of establishing a philologically complete inventory of the god's features."¹² There is more at stake in Nietzsche's argument than philological precision. He is making a claim about the nature of artistic creation; Apollo and Dionysus are simply representations that capture the truth underneath. Despite this criticism, or perhaps to appease those who need philological accuracy, Sallis points to the *Iliad*, to the scene where Diomedes attacks Aeneas, and is protected by Apollo. After beating back Diomedes, Apollo fashions a double image of Aeneas, to distract the enemy (*Iliad* V 445-455). There and elsewhere in the text, Apollo is referred to as far-shooting (ἐκηβόλος) or one who works from a distance (ἐκάεργος, *Iliad* V 439-444). Sallis uses this image-making capacity, as well as Apollo's effectiveness from a distance, as a source for Nietzsche's understanding of Apollo as the seeming which distances us from the Dionysiac.

One can certainly argue that this philological account is unnecessary, since Nietzsche is using them almost entirely as rhetorical pieces, largely independent of what "the Greeks" would have conceived of. However, if we are to give one, it seems that Sallis' account must be fleshed out. Instead of looking for Nietzsche's idea of the Apolline in the *Iliad* alone, it is also necessary to look at tragedy itself. We will focus specifically on the role of the Delphic oracle, as discussed above. It is apparent in the prophecy given to Orestes that the existence of the Apolline force is as something that projects an image for the sake of action.¹³ This will hopefully flesh out the

¹¹ For an especially scathing review of Nietzsche, read Detienne's "Forgetting Delphi Between Apollo and Dionysus." 2001:147-158.

¹² Sallis 1991:23

¹³ The reader might bring up Cassandra as a rebuttal to this argument. She will be dealt with in depth in Chapter II.

philological basis of Nietzsche's argument enough to satisfy those who are ready to tear down *The Birth of Tragedy* as philologically unsound.

With that aside, we can now examine our second god. Dionysus is the son of Zeus and Semele, and was born from the leg of his father. Semele was tricked by Hera into asking to see Zeus' true form. Overcome by the sight of his majesty, she died, and Zeus rescued the baby and sewed him into his leg. For this reason, Dionysus was called "εἰραφιῶτα," "Insewn."¹⁴ He was raised by Nymphs in Nysa, and not long after he joined them, they took him as their leader and followed him as "he began to wander through the woody coombes, thickly wreathed with ivy and laurel."¹⁵ He was called the "loud-crying god" and the "god of abundant clusters."¹⁶ He was the god of wine and drunken revelry, a nature god and a god of destruction.

The origins of Dionysus are unclear. He is not mentioned in the *Iliad*, and Herodotus mentions him being worshipped in Thrace, but his cult originating in Egypt.¹⁷ The god himself is even harder to describe, being the god of madness and change:

Description is conceptual, and what is the concept that applies to a creature in constant metamorphosis? Concepts grasp and arrest, but this god changes; concepts are limiting, but this god is the dissolver of limits and boundaries; concepts are defined by their opposites, but this god includes contradiction in his nature.¹⁸

There is a fundamental difference between Dionysus and the other Olympians. The other gods represent a sort of idealized man, whereas Dionysus recreates men in his own image. They are transformed by his madness to reflect one of his many forms. He is never constant, hiding behind a mask, then revealing himself in mad glory. He is what "lies beyond the veil of the Apollonian,

¹⁴ Evelyn-White 1914:I

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, XXVI

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, XXVI

¹⁷ Versényi 1962:82

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 84

and clearly beyond the veil of the ‘everyday’ habitual perception of life.”¹⁹ Whether he came from a foreign land, or whether he originated in Greece, it is no surprise that he gained the foothold in Athenian culture which he did. He was unstoppable.

Greece was primed for a Dionysiac takeover. They were a culture based in song; important lessons were often conveyed in musical form.²⁰ Festivals were often held for different gods; music was essential to these as well. The Dionysia, which contained the contest between tragic poets, started under the reign of Peisistratus in the 530s BCE. This was neither the first musical festival, nor was it even the most religiously important Dionysian festival in Athens.²¹ There is even evidence to suggest that the birth of tragedy was “a conscious and deliberate synthesis of most of the previously independent genres of Greek poetry into a new art.”²² Whether the creation of tragedy itself was as calculated as Herington claims, we have now arrived at the inception of tragedy.

The Birth of Tragedy is built upon the assumption that art takes a specific form, and thus has a specific perfection. All art arises from the same sources, and thus there is a way in which art ought to be. Art is in motion, and in tension, constantly evolving, “bound up with the duality of the *Apolline* and the *Dionysiac*” (BT 14). These two powers are the ultimate sources of art, and every work of art is derived from their combination in some way. Nietzsche refers to the Apolline as an image, the work of a sculptor, and the Dionysiac as fundamentally image-less. The subtlety of the relationship between these two powers is best captured by the “penetratingly

¹⁹ Sena 1994:189

²⁰ “Greece was essentially a song culture...Poetry, recited or sung, was for the early Greeks the prime medium for the dissemination of political, moral, and social ideas” (Herington 1985:3).

²¹ The Great Panathenaia, generally considered to be created under the mythical king Erichthonios, began about a generation before the Dionysia. (Herington 1985:84-87).

²² Herington 1985:79

vivid figures” of the Greek gods, but in reality, these powers predate the gods for which they are named (*BT 14*).

The struggle between these two artistic powers goes back to the struggle between the Titans and the Olympians. The struggle is ultimately between the primordial forces of chaotic nature and the imposed order of appearance. It predates humanity and erupts from nature itself, unmediated. Nietzsche sees four major movements take place, from which springs Greek tragedy. The first is the Titanic struggles of the iron age, and pre-Homeric thought; from this, Homer was born, along with epic poetry and the beautiful image. The Dionysiac responded by washing over the world in a great flood, followed by a reassertion of order in Doric art (*BT 21*). From this, tragedy is born. It is this “metaphysical miracle” which perfectly balances these powers. (*BT 14*).

Before we get too far ahead, we must give a further account of the Apolline and Dionysiac powers. It has already been stated that these two powers are the source of all artistic creation. In addition, they exist independently from man; they are fundamental parts of nature.

The Apolline is the dream-image that masks the Dionysiac beneath it. It is the veil that makes the ugly truth appear beautiful. It covers the Dionysiac truth of things, and is therefore a deception. It is imposed upon the truth by the viewer, a “lovely semblance produced by the inner world of fantasy” (*BT 16*). Nietzsche points to sculpture and epic poetry as particularly Apolline arts, because of their grounding in images. Sculpture is clear and determined and visible; it is beautiful and unchanging, quite literally carved in stone. Nietzsche sees the epic poet in the same way, saying that both he and the sculptor are “lost in the pure contemplation of images” (*BT 30*). The Apolline is a fundamentally shallow power; anything below the surface is hidden.

One aspect of the image produced by the Apolline is the *principium individuationis*. Nietzsche's understanding of this is taken from Schopenhauer's image of the boatman who sits calmly in his small craft in the middle of a tempest, protected by the idea of his individuality.²³ Nietzsche applies this quality to the Apolline, and describes Apollo as the "magnificent divine image" of the *principium individuationis* (BT 17). But when we lift the veil, we find the Dionysiac underneath.

The Dionysiac is best described by intoxication. It is a concept taken partly from Schopenhauer, described as the horror that seizes people "when they suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world" (BT 17). Nietzsche adds to this the "blissful ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man, indeed of nature itself, whenever this breakdown of the *principium individuationis* occurs" (BT 17). There arises a contradiction. On the one hand, the subject recognizes itself as the creator of its own world, thus becoming simultaneously artist and artwork; on the other, the subject is completely washed away in the Dionysiac flood, completely forgetting itself. All boundaries are washed away, both among humans, and between humans and nature, who "celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind" (BT 18). The Dionysiac is a flood that washes away structure and inhibition. The society that accepts this flood is quickly overcome by it.

The Apolline and the Dionysiac are locked in a constant struggle. As it has been related, this struggle goes back to the battle between the gods and the Titans. This struggle is also central to human existence: these two artistic drives are of paramount importance, since "only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified" (BT 113). Art would not have a central place in the world "unless art did not simply imitate the reality of nature but rather supplied a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, and was set alongside the latter as a

²³ Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, I, p. 416

way of overcoming it” (*BT* 113). The reality of nature is such that art is needed for survival; nature alone and unmediated would overwhelm humanity. Given that art is necessary for life, and that the struggle between the Apolline and the Dionysian is central to art, we must ask several questions. What is the resolution of this struggle? What does this resolution have to offer us, if anything? Is it permanent?

The Dionysian is too powerful for one under its influence to function in society. His followers, the Maenads, would often retreat into the woods when overcome with madness.²⁴ The Dionysian is also too powerful for the self, since it is destroyed completely in madness. The resolution to this is found in Greek tragedy, and the covering over of the Dionysian by the Apolline. Greek tragedy resolves the conflict between these two powers by combining them, so that the ugly and destructive truth of the Dionysiac is covered up and made beautiful by Apolline images. By viewing the Dionysiac through the lens of Apolline images, it becomes palatable, and one can grasp something from it.

What is it that can be grasped by viewing the Dionysiac through Apolline images? The answer is the wisdom of Silenus. It is recounted in fragments of an Aristotelean dialogue that King Midas went in search of Silenus.²⁵ Midas hunted after him for a long time, and when he finally caught him, Midas asked what was the best thing for humans. This was Silenus’ answer:

Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon. (*BT* 23).²⁶

²⁴ cf. Euripides’ *Bacchae*

²⁵ The dialogue is the *Eudemos*. As noted on page 22 of the *Birth of Tragedy*, Silenus has a complex history: originally silens were figures which combined human and horse qualities. The connection to Dionysus, and the development of Silenus as the oldest of the satyrs and the companion of Dionysus, is a later development. Further complicating the matter is the confusion between Silenus and Pan. Nietzsche is criticized by Wilamowitz-Möllendorf for his use of Silenus in this passage.

²⁶ Emphasis is Nietzsche’s

According to Silenus, the source of tragedy in performance is not unfortunate circumstances, nor is it terrible prophecies. Existence itself is tragic. The best thing available to mortals is death. Confronted with the truth of this statement, there is no action that can be taken for life.²⁷ In order for this truth to be managed, one must construct images in front of it. This is exactly what the Greeks did. They “knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to live at all they had to place in front of these things the resplendent, dream-born figures of the Olympians” (*BT* 23). Their gods were made from necessity; without them they would have perished.

The dream images of the Olympians are powerful. They are able “to complete and perfect existence and thus to seduce us into continuing to live” (*BT* 24). Life is made to be worth living because the gods also live it. So effective are the images of the gods that the Silenic wisdom is completely reversed: “the very worst thing for them was to die soon, the second worst ever to die at all” (*BT* 24). However, this dream image of the gods is only effective if it is not examined too closely as a dream image; otherwise it starts to break down.

Nietzsche observes that these dream-images are actually two layers removed from primordial reality. The foundation under everything is “the eternally suffering and contradictory, primordial unity,” which is also called the Dionysiac (*BT* 26). What we generally experience as real, empirical experience, is itself a representation which arises from the Dionysiac. It is out of this level that Apolline dream images arise. This makes the Apolline a “semblance of a semblance” (*BT* 26). The two powers are in a state of continual need for one another. The Dionysiac needs the Apolline for “constant release and redemption,” and the Apolline needs the Dionysiac because “the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the individual to generate the releasing and redemptive vision” (*BT* 26). If the Apolline is examined too closely, it

²⁷ In his later thought, Nietzsche will observe: “judgments of value about life, for it or against it, can in the end never be true: they have value only as symptoms...the value of life cannot be estimated” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates” ¶ 2).

begins to break down. The truth of its beauty built on ugliness is revealed, and the Dionysiac breaks through. However, the battle does not end with Dionysiac victory. Apollo strikes back with ever more rigid and powerful images. Wherever one god seems over-present, it is certain that the other is already hidden in our midst. And so the battle is waged.

The results of this battle are pivotal for life. An Apolline victory means that all truth would be covered in images; a Dionysiac victory means that true and ugly knowledge would be readily available, thus making action utterly impossible. Nietzsche compares the person full of Dionysiac knowledge with Shakespeare's Hamlet: "both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have *acquired knowledge* and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things... Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion" (BT 40). Action is necessary for life, making the Silenic wisdom essentially life-denying. The truth of things weighs too heavily on the Dionysiac human for him to be moved to act by any other force. In order to live, one must cover the truth over in images. Only through a combination of truth and appearance can life be lived.

Both the Dionysiac and the Apolline can be encapsulated in figures from tragedy. Cassandra represents the Dionysiac person, and Antigone represents one who sees the Apolline image. Cassandra was a Trojan princess who was courted by Apollo (Greene 2013: *Agamemnon* 1200-1210). When she rejected his advances, he put a curse on her so that she would be able to see the future, but that no one would ever believe her. She was doomed to know the truth, and be completely alone in her knowledge. She was utterly powerless to use her knowledge; she was frozen in place by the horror of it all. This can be seen very clearly in her lament to the Chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. She is confronted with the reality of her imminent death at the hands of Clytemnestra, and can do nothing about it. She knows that Agamemnon is about to be killed, and

instead of commanding the elders of the city to rush in and save him, she can do nothing but lament the situation:

ἰὼ ἰὼ ταλαίνας κακόποτμοι τύχαι:
τὸ γὰρ ἐμὸν θροῶ πάθος ἐπεγχύδαν.
ποῖ δὴ με δεῦρο τὴν τάλαιναν ἤγαγες;
οὐδέν ποτ' εἰ μὴ ξυνθανουμένην. τί γάρ;

Alas, alas for the wretchedness of my ill-starred life,
This pain flooding the song of sorrow is mine alone.
Why have you brought me here in all unhappiness?
Why, why? Except to die with him? What else could be?
(Greene 2013: *Agamemnon* 1136-1139).

In the end, she enters the palace, walking to her own death. She can do nothing else; she is overcome. Before she enters the palace, she leaves the elders with a glimpse of the Silenic wisdom: “ἰὼ βρότεια πράγματ': εὐτυχοῦντα μὲν / σκιά τις ἂν τρέψειεν: εἰ δὲ δυστυχῆ, / βολαῖς ὑγρώσσων σπόγγος ὤλεσεν γραφήν,” “Alas, poor men, their destiny. When all goes well / a shadow will overthrow it. If it be unkind / one stroke of a wet sponge wipes all the picture out” (Greene 2013: *Agamemnon* 1327-1329).

Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta, and the sister of Eteocles and Polynices, who fight in a civil war against each other. Creon, the king, forbids the burial of Polynices, but Antigone rebels. She appears to be acting out of piety, attempting to respect the gods' decrees on burial of the dead, and looking out for her brother. She is spurred to action by her view of the world through a veil; her perspective is uncomplicated and solid. She doesn't doubt herself, she is not frozen into inaction. She acts in the way that appears to her to be best.

When Ismene questions her, she says:

οὔτ' ἂν κελεύσαιμ' οὔτ' ἂν, εἰ θέλοις ἔτι
πράσσειν, ἐμοῦ γ' ἂν ἠδέως δρώης μέτα.
ἀλλ' ἴσθ' ὅποιά σοι δοκεῖ, κεῖνον δ' ἐγὼ
θάψω: καλόν μοι τοῦτο ποιούση θανεῖν.

And if now you wished
to act, you wouldn't please me as a partner.
Be what you want to; but that man shall I
bury. For me, the doer, death is best
(Greene 2013: *Antigone* 69-72).

Antigone's focus is on action. She calls herself "the doer." This is made possible by viewing the world from under a certain veil.

According to Nietzsche, the two figures of Cassandra and Antigone are combined to form Attic tragedy. Both characters have no children, but their characterizations are combined to form a child who is the genius of the world, a combination of the Apolline and the Dionysiac into one (*BT* 28). Both characters have complex relationships with birth. Antigone was born of Oedipus and Jocasta, an incestuous relationship.²⁸ As for Cassandra, the source of her curse comes from her refusal to bear Apollo a child. Given these relationships, it is interesting that Nietzsche chooses these two figures to represent the forces that give birth to tragedy.

As has been shown, the Apollonian and Dionysiac forces govern the development of art. The struggle to cover up the terrible truth of the Dionysiac with the beauty of Apollo gives rise to the different forms of art throughout history, ultimately reaching a perfection in Attic tragedy. In the next chapter, I will analyze the combination of these forces in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides by following tragedy from its birth to its death, using *The Birth of Tragedy* and some of Nietzsche's shorter essays on the Greeks to analyze certain plays. Of key importance will be the role of the Silenic wisdom.

Chapter Two: Apollo and Dionysus in Tragedy

Now that the relationship between the Dionysian and Apolline powers is clear, it is possible to transfer this to a discussion of Greek tragedy. Specifically, this discussion will

²⁸ Antigone's name means "against birth" or "born against." This could be suggestive of the unnatural and tragic state of her own birth.

include Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and *Antigone*. We will examine them in relation to *The Birth of Tragedy* and some of Nietzsche's other writings in order to better understand the struggle between Apollo and Dionysus, and their harmony in tragedy.

Before giving an account of the struggle between Apollo and Dionysus, it is necessary to give an account of Attic tragedy itself. Tragedy was born from several different older artistic forms, such as ritual dances, choral odes, and epic poetry.²⁹ From Aristotle we get the traditional account of tragedy's growth from the dithyramb to Aeschylus' second actor, and Sophocles' third, as well as the reduction of the chorus' role (*Poetics* 1449a). The veracity of this account is based largely on "whether we believe that Aristotle knew anything."³⁰ It could be that he had access to ancient texts which are lost to us, but it is also possible that he did not, and his account is, at least in part, fictitious. The name of tragedy, having something to do with a goat, could be traced back to Thespis, who was the first actor and playwright, according to the Marmor Parium, and ancient Greek inscription. This particular story claimed that Thespis created his play to win a billy goat sometime between 540 and 520 BCE.³¹ Tragedy took as its subject matter tales from legend and myth (such as the *Iliad*), as well as from history (Aeschylus' *Persians* is one such example).

The form of tragedy most familiar to the modern reader developed in Athens in the context of the City Dionysia, a spring festival centered around the god Dionysus. Tragedy was one of several types of performance given; comedies and "circular choruses" were also performed.³² The tragedies were performed in the theater of Dionysus. The original structure has

²⁹ Scodel 2010:33-35

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35

³¹ *Ibid.*, 34

³² Scodel 2010:40

been rebuilt many times, and “archaeologists and theater historians cannot agree on whether the auditorium as a whole was a trapezoid or circular, and whether the acting and dancing space was circular or rectangular.”³³ Despite these scholarly debates, there are some things concerning tragedy which are known for certain.

Historical and social context were incredibly formative in tragedy’s development. Recent historical events were often the subject matter of tragedy. Aeschylus’ *Persians* depicted the Persian court following the battle at Salamis, which happened less than a decade before the play was performed.³⁴ Additionally, Athens’ status as a democracy and as a *polis* were essential to the development of tragedy. The *polis* was often the setting of the action, although plays were usually set in cities other than Athens; Thebes was a common choice. Additionally, playwrights and actors were usually sponsored by the Athenian state.³⁵ As such, tragedies often make reference to Athens in a positive light.³⁶ Aside from simply discussing the Athenian *polis*, tragedy also developed alongside another Athenian innovation, democracy. In reference to tragedy, “one can ask not only how society shaped the work in form of us but also how the play helped shape the society.”³⁷ Tragedy was designed to elicit a response from its audience, one that often affected more than just one’s momentary disposition. Tragedy can serve to educate the populace, an essential thing in a society based on representative government. An example of this would be: “if you are reading or seeing *Antigone* when you are being called upon to make an ethical decision, her story may have a sharpened impact on the choices you make.”³⁸ Tragedy was a fundamentally social and political art form.

³³ *Ibid.* 41

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 72

³⁵ Rabinowitz 2008:33

³⁶ This can be seen often with works of Euripides: the Trojan women hope to be taken to Athens; Medea is promised sanctuary in Athens by the king Aigeus.

³⁷ Rabinowitz 2008:58-9

³⁸ Rabinowitz 2008:58

Why, then, is all of this relatively absent from Nietzsche's discussion of tragedy? Did he see this as unimportant? Was he unaware of these facets of tragedy? Of use here is the idea that "texts have many voices not one...though one voice may be enforced and empowered."³⁹ This observation is made in an attempt to reconcile tragedies as state-sponsored and as providing criticism of the state. However, it can also be put to use to demonstrate that, while the political context of tragedy informed its development, it is possible and permissible to simply look at tragedy as an art, as a struggle between Apollo and Dionysus.

An essential characteristic of this struggle is the perception of true knowledge. For Nietzsche's Greeks, true knowledge was something tragic and ugly. This is apparent in Attic tragedy. An examination of tragedy with this in mind will help reveal the essential difference between ancients and moderns prevalent in Nietzsche's work. Specifically, it will show how a change in humanity's relationship to knowledge was instrumental in giving birth to modernity, and how this transition is irreversible.

To modern eyes, the struggle between Apollo and Dionysos might appear odd. For the modern, conflict is undesirable. In his essay "Homer's Contest," Nietzsche observes that it is difficult for modern men to understand the conflict of the ancients, saying that celebrations of conflict "seem to our scholars incomprehensible in this place. In their judgment, the predicates 'grudge' and 'envy' fit only the nature of the bad" (Homer's Contest 176). The idea of having conflict at the center of all art and culture might appear untenable, in a sense. There is no way that a stable structure can be built when the foundation is in a constant state of change. And in a way this evaluation is correct. As Nietzsche points out in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Apollo and Dionysos wax and wane in influence. The growth in power of one is evidence for the imminent rise of the other. There is no stasis.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 54

However, this is not to say that Greek society was chaotic. Both Nietzsche and the Greeks understood well that there was a difference between stasis and order. This is clear in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where the imposition of stasis by both Ouranos and Kronos leads not to order, but to an upheaval in the way of things. When Ouranos prevents Gaia from giving birth to children through constant intercourse with her, she becomes bloated with children. These children are deformed as a result, becoming the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handed Ones. In order to end her pain, she convinces Kronos to castrate Ouranos, thus freeing her to give birth (*Theogony* 184-211). Kronos learns the wrong lesson from this experience and tries to prevent the birth of his own children by swallowing them immediately after birth. It is again the plot of Gaia that results in the smuggling away of Zeus and the overthrow of Kronos (*Theogony* 438-483). Each time change was halted, damage was done. Attempts at imposed stasis result in eruptions of chaos in order to restore balance. Order needs motion and generation to exist.

Nietzsche understood the idea that order was dependent upon struggle. This is clear from his essay, "Homer's Contest." From the beginning, Nietzsche asserts: "Man, at the finest height of his powers, is all nature and carries nature's uncanny dual character in himself" (Homer's Contest 174)⁴⁰. He identifies in the Greeks a fierceness and a tendency toward violence that the modern person would balk at. He points to Achilles dragging Hector's body through the dirt behind his chariot, saying the reader is there looking "into the bottomless pit of hatred" (HC 174). This part of the Greek nature extends beyond the battlefield.

Nietzsche points back to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, where he introduces the idea of two Eris-goddesses.⁴¹ Nietzsche sees this idea as central and says it ought to be "impressed upon newcomers right at the gate of entry to Hellenic ethics" (HC 176). The first Eris causes war and

⁴⁰ Will be abbreviated as HC hereafter.

⁴¹ The goddess Eris is goddess of Strife and Competition.

strife and is deserving of hatred. This goddess traces back her birth to Night, as catalogued in Hesiod's *Theogony*. The second Eris Zeus places among men, and she is worthy of praise. She inspires men to compete with each other, desiring to be better than those around them. Whereas envy occupies a low place in modern ethics, Nietzsche observes that "The Greek is *envious* and does not experience this characteristic as a blemish, but as the effect of a *benevolent deity*"⁴² (HC 177). Envy extended beyond just relations between peers. Gods could be envious of men, a fact which men needed to keep in mind, lest they become too high and challenge the gods. The wise person did not risk crossing the gods, but prostrated himself before them when he was benefitted with good fortune.

A clear example of this fear of rising too high and incurring divine wrath can be seen in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Just after sacking Troy and returning home with his spoils, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra tries to welcome him home with a rolled out carpet, so that he could walk from his chariot into his house without setting foot on the ground. Agamemnon responds to this by entreating his wife to treat him as a man, not a god:

καὶ τᾶλλα μὴ γυναικὸς ἐν τρόποις ἐμὲ
ἄβρυνε, μηδὲ βαρβάρου φωτὸς δίκην
χαμαιπετὲς βόαμα προσχάνης ἐμοί,
μηδ' εἵμασι στρώσασ' ἐπίφθονον πόρον
τίθει: θεοῦς τοι τοῖσδε τιμαλφεῖν χρεῶν:
ἐν ποικίλοις δὲ θνητὸν ὄντα κάλλεσιν
βαίνειν ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐδαμῶς ἄνευ φόβου.
λέγω κατ' ἄνδρα, μὴ θεόν, σέβειν ἐμέ.

For the rest, pamper me not as if I were a woman, nor, like some barbarian, grovel before me with widemouthed acclaim; and do not draw down envy upon my path by strewing it with tapestries. It is the gods we must honor thus; but it is not possible for a mortal to tread upon embroidered fineries without fear. I tell you to revere me not as a god, but as a man. (*Agamemnon* 918-925).

⁴² Emphasis is Nietzsche's.

He knows what will befall him if he should rival the gods. However, in this scene he is not only concerned with angering the gods; there is a fear of upsetting his fellow mortals as well:

“Agamemnon fears to give any appearance of hybris to gods and men.”⁴³ By returning as a conqueror, he is already greatly glorified. If he allows himself to be treated as a god, he risks gain enemies. In his moment of greatest triumph, Agamemnon is forced to walk a fine line between appreciating his honors and not angering anyone. This is a struggle that the wise Greek would have had to battle with regularly. Of course, from a certain point of view rivalry with the gods was a sign of prosperity. But on the other hand, incurring their wrath was the worst fate possible. The evidence for this can be seen throughout the Greek Underworld, with Tantalus and Sisyphus. This example from tragedy clearly shows how essential struggle was to Greek culture.

One incarnation of this struggle has to do with knowledge and its place in the lives of humans. Aeschylus sees knowledge as a burden. This can be seen in *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus reveals that he is being punished for two actions: he gave fire to mankind, and he took from them knowledge of the future, giving them false hopes: θνητούς γ' ἔπαυσα μὴ προδέρκεσθαι μόρον... τυφλάς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐλπίδας κατόκισα. “I kept mortals from foreseeing destiny...in them I planted blind hopes.”⁴⁴ (250-252). By giving mortals blind hope, he hides their knowledge of the future. It is remarkable that the god of forethought would think this would serve to aid them. He hides the truth of their mortality from them and gives them false hopes, in an attempt to help them. It is not knowledge itself that is damaging, but the knowledge of mortality captured in the Silenic wisdom. This knowledge is more than just knowing that they will someday die; it also encompasses the tragedy of living as a mortal.

⁴³ Fontenrose 1971:105

⁴⁴ Translation my own.

However, Prometheus does not appear to actually take from them knowledge of the future. He simply claims to stop them from seeing it. There are two ways to interpret this. The first is that humanity once knew everything that would happen to him, in the same way that Prometheus does. The second interpretation is that before Prometheus, humanity was confronted harshly with his own mortality. He saw the future clearly and saw his own imminent end. By giving men false hopes, Prometheus is able to distance men from this truth. In this way, he is functioning in the role of Apollo, placing the veil of hopes over their eyes in order to make life possible. As one who sees the future clearly, Prometheus knows the effect that can have: “By awareness of what he knows, and what no one else in the play knows, Prometheus is made supremely aware of his own distinctness, and separateness, as an individual. He is thrown back onto his inner uniqueness.”⁴⁵ If he allows humanity to retain what it knows about death, it will inform their actions in a way that Prometheus saw as undesirable.

Nietzsche points out a struggle inherent in the Promethean myth: the origin of fire. For Nietzsche’s Greeks, the theft of fire and its gift to humanity were necessary crimes. The use of fire “struck those contemplative original men as a crime, a theft perpetrated on divine nature, to believe that humanity commanded fire freely, rather than receiving it as a gift from heaven” (*BT* 49). Humanity is only able to make the first great step of progress by “committing an offence and must in turn accept the consequences of this, namely the whole flood of suffering and tribulations which the offended heavenly powers *must* in turn visit upon the human race” (*BT* 50). There is a contrast apparent here; on the one hand, Prometheus is the source of both humanity’s suffering and his progress, and on the other hand Prometheus provides false hopes to cover over humanity’s terrible foreknowledge. He possesses a “simultaneously Apolline and Dionysiac nature” (*BT* 51).

⁴⁵ Will 1962:77

In the first chapter, we established how Dionysiac wisdom was too much for humans. It needed to be covered over with the beautiful semblance of Apollo. Nietzsche claims that this combination reaches perfection with the rise of Greek tragedy. However, there are moments within tragedies themselves which lose that balance. One of the most striking scenes where this occurs is in *Agamemnon*, where Cassandra laments her situation to the chorus of elderly men.⁴⁶ Cassandra was cursed by Apollo to give true but ineffective prophecies when she rejected his advances on her. She becomes his priestess, but in this scene she serves as a look into Dionysiac knowledge and the effect that it has on those who know it. Cassandra sees into the future, and glimpses her murder and the murder of Agamemnon, yet she is powerless to do anything to change it.

The chorus is able to glean this information from her laments, which are initially addressed to Apollo, then to Clytemnestra. The chorus remarks, “from prophecies what word of good ever comes to mortals?” (*Agamemnon* 1135). In her essay on oracles in tragedy, Johnston claims these words by the chorus “might also serve as a motto for the whole *Oresteia*.”⁴⁷ While her article proceeds in a different direction, outlining the uses of the oracle in tragedy, the sentiment she expresses is still applicable. Divine wisdom is useless to mortals.

Wisdom that has its source in Dionysos is even more useless. Cassandra is overcome by it. Unable to act, she stands transfixed before the house of Agamemnon, lamenting her misfortune. This is clearly the work of Dionysos; as Nietzsche states, “Knowledge kills action...once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks” (*BT* 40). Once under the thrall of Dionysos, Cassandra can do nothing except lament the horrors of her own existence. The chorus, too,

⁴⁶ The passage begins on line 1072 of the *Agamemnon*.

⁴⁷ Johnston 2009:219

recognizes this transition. They attribute her prophesying to “some malignant spirit” (Agamemnon 1175). This is a change from their original diagnosis, which attributed her prophecies to Apollo. However, since they are only witnesses of Cassandra, and not of the knowledge itself, they are saved from her fate. Eventually Cassandra is so overcome that she is driven to cast off her signs of office and stomps on them (Agamemnon 1265-1270). This is a highly symbolic act; no longer under the domain of Apollo, she casts off his signs. Now fully overcome with Dionysiac knowledge, she represents the transition with a destructive act, which is as much a symbol of Dionysos as his *thyrsus* and leopard skin.

But how is it possible that what is revealed through a priestess of Apollo could be Dionysiac in nature? Shouldn't the words of Cassandra instead be a healing balm for the elderly chorus members? At first glance, there appears to be something at fault with Nietzsche's account. Dionysos destroys, and Apollo creates, or so it first seemed. However, dismissing Nietzsche's account of the Dionysian and Apolline powers because a priestess of Apollo is giving Dionysiac wisdom would be overeager. Nietzsche's work is subtler than that. The creative and destructive powers at the center of all artistic creation are *represented* by Apollo and Dionysos. To claim that the powers are tied to the two deities in a more essential way is to give an over-simplified account of Nietzsche's thought.⁴⁸ As has been demonstrated, Cassandra has access to Dionysian knowledge. The fact that she is a priestess of Apollo does nothing to take away from this fact.

Cassandra is just one half of the child which crowns the “mysterious marriage” of Apollo and Dionysos in tragedy (*BT* 28). The other half is Antigone. Whereas Cassandra is overcome with Dionysiac knowledge, Antigone is representative of Apolline semblance. Unlike Cassandra, Antigone is a character of action. In the opening lines of the play she alerts her sister to the

⁴⁸ cf. Detienne's article, “Forgetting Delphi between Apollo and Dionysus”

problem, that Eteocles will receive a burial while Polynices is to be left unburied. Once Antigone has communicated the situation, she does not commiserate with her sister, or wonder about what is to be done; she immediately asks Ismene, “εἰ τὸν νεκρὸν ξὺν τῆδε κουφιᾶς χερί.” “Will you join your hand to mine in order to lift his corpse?” (*Antigone* 43). When her sister is unwilling, Antigone resolves to act alone. When confronted, she stands up to Creon and doesn’t back down. She eventually is punished for covering the body of her brother Polynices and hangs herself in a cave.

There are clearly many differences between Antigone and Cassandra. Whereas Cassandra is overcome with knowledge of what is about to be, Antigone, who is in an equally terrible situation, is able to act. While she is ultimately unsuccessful, she still engages in action. This is due to a simple fact: while Cassandra is overcome with Dionysiac knowledge, Antigone is able to cover herself with a veil of semblance that distances her from the horror she is presented with in order to act. Certainly, there are horrors for her to behold. Her very existence is a travesty, hence her name, “born against.” She is the incestuous offspring of Oedipus with his mother Jocasta. In addition, her two brothers began a civil war and then killed each other in a duel. But instead of being immobilized by this, she covers herself in a veil of piety and pursues her goal of burying her brother.

But is Antigone truly pious, or is she acting wrongly in disobeying Creon’s edict? This question has not been fully answered; the debate over morality in *Antigone* is complex.⁴⁹ On the one hand, Creon seems overly cruel and impious for forbidding a burial for Polynices, especially given that he was the rightful ruler, and only provoked war when Eteocles refused to abandon the throne. On the other hand, Creon finds himself leading Thebes after it had been through repeated

⁴⁹ For commentary on the question of morality in *Antigone*, and tragedy as a whole, see *The Origin of the Greek Tragic Form*, by August Mahr 1938, Prentice-Hall, Inc.

disasters. They were being preyed on by the Sphinx, who was killed by Oedipus, who became king. When a plague struck, it was revealed that Oedipus had committed patricide and was married to his mother. After he left, civil war broke out between his sons. Creon inherits all of this, and feels the need to make a statement, so that all his citizens will know the consequences for questioning the authority of the ruler.

Antigone sees none of this complexity. Modern interpretations sometimes paint her as an overly stubborn character who doomed herself by her unwillingness to listen to Creon and try to compromise with him. For many, the play presents a *moral* message. However, I think this is a misunderstanding. Antigone is simply acting under her veil, the veil of piety. She wants to give her brother a proper burial because he is her brother. Speaking to Ismene, she says, “he is my brother, and yours too, even if you wish it otherwise. I will never be convicted of betraying him” (*Antigone* 45-46). Antigone is not acting out of stubbornness. She is acting out of necessity. Without her piety, her veil would collapse, and she would be confronted with the horror of her situation. She acts, in order to avoid the fate of Cassandra. Ultimately, the horror of her situation does triumph, and she meets her end, but while she is able to maintain her veil of piety, she manages to act, and to do what is necessary.

Cassandra is confronted with Dionysiac knowledge in an unavoidable manner. Sophocles presents the audience with a character who seeks out this knowledge, no matter the cost. This character is Oedipus. The central motion in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* is a search for knowledge. At the opening of the play, Oedipus is seeking the source of the plague that is decimating his city. He has sent Creon to discover the source of the plague, since he has no other recourse available (*Oedipus Tyrannos* 70).⁵⁰ He is determined to know the truth of things. Throughout the play, Oedipus is given several opportunities and warnings to turn away from the

⁵⁰ Will be abbreviated as OT hereafter.

information that he is seeking, since it will be harmful to him. Yet he pursues it anyway, regardless of consequence. It is very telling that the seer who knows the truth, Tiresias, tries to dissuade Oedipus from learning it, in much the same way that Prometheus distracted men from seeing the truth clearly by giving them false hopes. However, there is a key distinction between Prometheus and Tiresias: Prometheus is immortal, and Tiresias is a man. This difference can be seen clearly in how they are able to manage knowledge of the truth. Discovery of truth is often conceived of as a function of sight. Thus, Tiresias' blindness should serve as a warning to all men who seek the truth; it comes with a great price. Oedipus, upon learning the truth, blinds himself, no longer wishing to see: "the hand that struck my eyes was none other than my own, wretched that I am! Why should I see, when sight showed me nothing sweet?" (OT 1334-1335).

Nietzsche is struck by the character of Oedipus, noting the boldness necessary for wisdom:

How else could nature be forced to reveal its secrets, other than by victorious resistance to her...I see this insight expressed in that terrible trinity of Oedipus' fates: the same man who solves the riddle of nature—that of the double-natured sphinx—must also destroy the most sacred orders of nature by murdering his father and becoming his mother's husband. Wisdom, the myth seems to whisper to us, and Dionysiac wisdom in particular, is an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person. (*BT* 48).

This is the tragedy of Oedipus, that by seeking wisdom he damned himself. Had he lived in ignorance, he could have been happy. But he sought something not meant for mortals, and he bore the results.

As we have seen, the Greeks have an attitude towards knowledge that is "un-modern." There is some knowledge that is off-limits for mortals. Those who strive for it, or attain it by gift, cannot live on. Next, we will examine a change in attitude towards knowledge. In Aeschylus and Sophocles, it is a terrible thing, and a heavy burden to bear. Nietzsche accuses Euripides,

together with Socrates, of being responsible for the death of tragedy. We will examine their work alongside of *The Birth of Tragedy* in order to determine whether a shift in attitude towards knowledge can be blamed as the culprit responsible for the death of tragedy.

Attic tragedy was born out of a momentary balance between two constantly battling and shifting powers. It existed for a brief historical moment, before imbalance overtook it and tragedy died. Nietzsche claims it died by suicide: it was killed from the inside, by the tragedian Euripides (*BT* 54). Is Nietzsche correct in putting all the agency on one man, or was tragedy doomed to fall?

We must begin by examining Nietzsche's claim. He says that the death of tragedy was unique. He describes the death of other great artistic movements, saying "they slip away slowly, and before their dying gaze there already stands their more beautiful offspring, raising his head impatiently and gesturing bravely" (*BT* 54). He gives no examples, so it falls on the reader to either take him at his word or investigate his claim further. Nietzsche's prose is powerful, and the urge to believe him is strong, but we must resist, and question him.

That tragedy died without leaving an heir is clear to see. Nietzsche speaks of a New Attic Comedy that is born from tragedy but is far lesser. New Attic Comedy, he claims, continues the tradition of Euripides by lowering the dramatic arts to the level of the spectator. This is the crime which kills tragedy. It was an art form that took its cue from the Homeric tradition; it continued in the same elevated vein. The stories that the tragedians told before Euripides concerned themselves with the lives of noble individuals, heroes from the distant past. Euripides took these heroes and contaminated them by putting them on stage with common people. The ordinary Athenian "now heard and saw his double on the Euripidean stage and was delighted that the latter knew how to speak so well" (*BT* 56). A clear example is Euripides' *Medea*, in which the

common Nurse introduces the story and interacts with the great figures of Jason and Medea. The spectators are no longer watching the thinly veiled horror of the Dionysiac unfold before them; instead, they are enjoying the fact that someone just like them is interacting so well with figures of legend.

But why would Euripides do this? If indeed an essential component of tragedy is its elevated nature, why would Euripides do away with it? For Nietzsche, the answer is quite simple: Euripides did not understand tragedy. He realized this fact about himself and bowed to the will of two spectators. The first of these was "Euripides the *thinker*, not the poet," who could not grasp the depth which his predecessors had access to (*BT* 58). He was more properly a critic than a playwright and saw reason as "the real root of all enjoyment and creation" (*BT* 59). What Euripides could not reconcile was the idea that there was a depth to Aeschylus and Sophocles that exceeded reason and pointed "into that which cannot be illuminated" (*BT* 58). This could not satisfy Euripides, who looked for justification in his thoughts about tragedy. He sought certain knowledge over the Silenic wisdom. He found what he was looking for in Socrates, the second figure who did not understand tragedy.

In a way, Socrates enabled Euripides to wreak the destruction that he did. According to Nietzsche's account, when Euripides admits to himself that he does not understand tragedy, "he was bound to ask and look around to see whether there was no one else who thought as he did and admitted to themselves, as he did, that this incommensurability existed" between reason and the depth of the tragedies (*BT* 59). No one was able to give him a satisfactory account, except for Socrates, "who did not understand tragedy and therefore had no respect for it" (*BT* 59). Like Euripides, Socrates saw reason as the ultimate justifier in art. To see proof of this, one must look

no further than Plato's most famous depiction of Socrates, found in his *Republic*.⁵¹ In Book Three, Socrates criticizes tragedy as an imitation, which he seeks to ban from his ideal city (394d). Again in Book Seven of his *Laws*, Plato again rejects the tragedians, writing as "the Athenian":

Do not imagine, then, that we will ever thus lightly allow you [addressing the tragedians] to set up your stage beside us in the marketplace, and give permission to those imported actors of yours, with their dulcet tones and their voices louder than ours, to harangue women and children and the whole populace, and to say not the same things as we say about the same institutions, but, on the contrary, things that are, for the most part, just the opposite. (817c)

From these passages, it is clear that Socrates does not respect tragedy, and seeks to censor it, because it does not live up to his standards of reason.

In allying himself with Socrates, Euripides changed the nature of the artistic cycle in a fundamental way. He set up Socrates against the figure of Dionysus, in an attempt to rationalize "that which cannot be illuminated," the Dionysiac (*BT* 58). Unfortunately for tragedy, Euripides was successful.

With his new ally, Euripides expelled Dionysus from the stage. He replaced the Apolline and Dionysiac powers with "paradoxical *thoughts*--in place of Apolline visions--and fiery *affects*--in place of Dionysiac ecstasies" (*BT* 62). The two powers are replaced with imitations, and reason is touted as supreme. Euripides the spectator and critic triumphs over Euripides the playwright, and reason "destroys the essence of tragedy which can only be interpreted as a manifestation and transformation into images of Dionysiac states, as the visible symbolization of music, as the dream-world of Dionysiac intoxication" (*BT* 70). In this way, tragedy dies.

At least, this is Nietzsche's claim. But can it really be defended that Euripides expels Dionysus from the stage? After all, he wrote a play, the *Bacchae*, which seems to celebrate

⁵¹ The question of the difference between the historical Socrates and Plato's dramatic Socrates will not be discussed in this paper.

Dionysus' power. He punishes the unbelievers, particularly Pentheus, who has banned his worship in Thebes. This play seems to reject Nietzsche's claim. What does he have to say about it? He frames the whole play as a meditation on whether Dionysus should have a place in Athenian culture: "Can the Dionysiac be permitted to exist at all? Should it not be eradicated forcibly from Hellenic soil? It certainly should, the poet tells us, if this were at all possible, but the god Dionysos is too powerful" (*BT* 60). According to Nietzsche, Euripides is weighing the possibility of expelling Dionysus from Greek life, apparently concluding that it is far too difficult.

There is an alternate interpretation of the *Bacchae*, one which sees it as a social commentary on Athens at the time Euripides wrote it. It was written "in the third decade of the Peloponnesian War; less than two years after its first performance, Athens fell."⁵² Could Euripides be warning his fellow citizens about their situation? Kott calls this play "the tragedy of the madness of Greece, the madness of rulers and of people."⁵³ Attic tragedy had an undeniably political element to it. It seems that Euripides is simply tapping into that; Aeschylus and Sophocles do the same. So why does Nietzsche take issue with Euripides alone? Perhaps, with respect to the *Bacchae*, it is Euripides' use of Dionysus. He is the god whose festival is being celebrated, and he is the reason that the tragedies have been written. He is so omnipresent that it seems odd to actually put him onstage as an actor. This play is "the only explicitly Dionysian play that we have," and perhaps there is good reason for that.⁵⁴ If the *Bacchae* is a critique of Athens, then Euripides is *using* Dionysus to achieve his ends. Nietzsche would see this as an inversion of the way tragedy is structured. Humans are supposed to be overcome by Dionysus, not the other way around. But due to his alliance with Socrates, Euripides is able to overcome

⁵² Kott 1970:229

⁵³ Kott 1970:229

⁵⁴ Rabinowski 2008:83

Dionysus; using him as a character to spread what message he wants is the ultimate proof that Euripides succeeds in expelling Dionysus.

What is so problematic about the introduction of Socrates against Dionysus? As we have established, art is based in struggle. Surely Socrates struggling against Dionysus could be good for art. This might seem to be true at first glance, but for Nietzsche, art is based in a very specific struggle: art is “the expression of two interwoven artistic drives, *the Apolline and the Dionysiac*” (BT 59). These two drives struggle between each other, gaining and losing influence, but always present. The introduction of Socrates changes this dynamic. Instead of interweaving, and struggling with the two artistic drives, Socrates looks to abolish them. He does not represent any sort of artistic force; he merely seeks to discredit them through rationalizing. This is Nietzsche's account of the death of tragedy; it is overcome by reason. Nietzsche blames Euripides, and to a greater extent, Socrates.

Conclusion

As we have seen, for Nietzsche, all art is a battle between the Apolline and Dionysiac powers. Different artistic movements arise from a different combination of these two powers. They are always in flux, and so art is always changing. Nietzsche identified Attic tragedy as the perfect mixture of Dionysiac and Apolline forces. I set out to determine the role that Dionysiac knowledge played in this balance.

We have looked at several tragedies and have seen how Dionysiac knowledge is treated. It might now be useful to compare how tragic knowledge appears to the Greeks and to us. Dionysiac truth gets to the heart of things in a way that tears the individual apart. It is an active knowledge, because it changes the knower. Cassandra and Oedipus were both overcome with the knowledge that was given to them. Cassandra was unable to do anything but lament her fate, so powerful was the terrible knowledge within her. Oedipus, upon learning of his unwitting crimes, stabbed out his own eyes. The knowledge that confronts these characters is so powerful, they try to flee. But of course, they cannot; Oedipus does not remove the pain of his new knowledge by removing his eyesight. For the Greeks, Dionysiac knowledge is inescapable.

I posit, however, that modern society has escaped the thrall of Dionysiac knowledge. As Nietzsche observes, the Greeks were more sensitive to pain than we are. At the beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche raises an important question, “whether the Greeks’ ever more powerful *demand for beauty*, for festivals, entertainments, new cults, really grew from a lack, from deprivation” (BT 7). If the answer to this question is yes, he argues, then where can the desire for ugliness, expressed in tragedy and Dionysiac wisdom, have its source, except “in *desire and delight*, in strength, in overbrimming health” (BT 7). If this thesis of Nietzsche’s is

correct, then the artistic movements of a time move counter to the state of its people, as a sort of antidote to their present.

An analysis of our artistic present is too large a task to embark upon in a conclusion. Simply put, we are unlike the Greeks. Nietzsche's diagnosis of his Germany rings true today: "our inner being is too weak and disorderly to have an external effect and give itself a form" (*History* 26). Our inner selves have been divorced from our outer selves. As a result, we "feel with abstraction" (*History* 27).

Why is this so? How can we have escaped the influence of Dionysus? The answer lies with Euripides. By introducing Socrates to the stage, he did away with the artistic balance that had previously governed human creation, and to a larger extent, human feeling. Before Euripides, art had grown from a struggle in humanity to cover the terrible truths of Dionysus with the beautiful images of Apollo. With Euripides, rationality was inserted into art, thus upsetting the balance. As a result, reason has become entrenched in art, making a return to the balance of Attic tragedy impossible.

The division between ancients and moderns is characterized by mastery. The ancient Greeks struggled to cover the Dionysiac with the Apolline, in order to make life bearable. For the moderns, the idea of constant struggle is a foreign one, simply because it no longer applies. When something is mastered, struggle with it ceases. The struggle between Apollo and Dionysus ceased when Euripides used the reasoned criticism of Socrates to expel Dionysus. This expulsion made Apolline images unnecessary; reasoned criticism of both gods has kept them at bay. So long as reason is paired with art, Apollo and Dionysus will be kept in the unreachable past.

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