

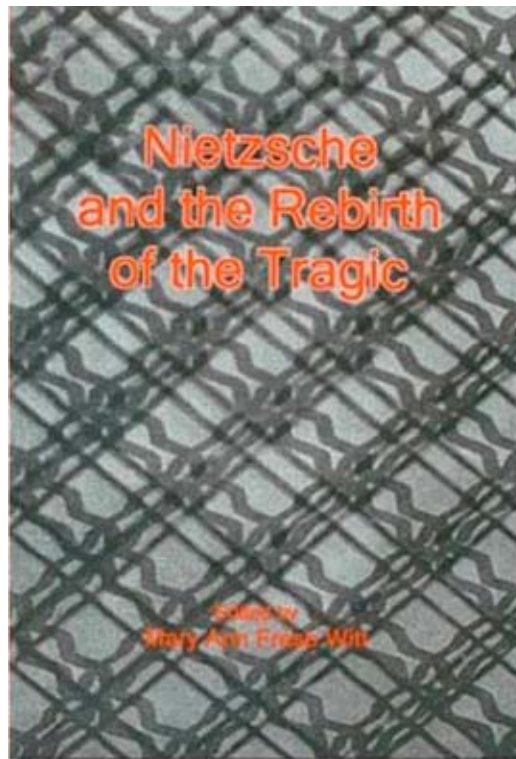
Book Review

Nietzsche and the Rebirth of the Tragic

edited by Mary Ann Frese Witt (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007)

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Nietzsche and the Rebirth of the Tragic is a collection of essays on the legacy of Nietzsche's thought on tragedy. The underlining topic of all contributions is the influence of the Nietzschean call for the rebirth of tragedy in modern artistic and philosophical creations. The volume offers a rich overview of the impact of Nietzsche's conception of tragic and cultural renewal in the works of European and American dramatists, poets, philosophers, filmmakers and writers. In the introduction to the volume (1-39), Mary Ann Frese Witt presents the historic philosophic and aesthetic context of the renewed interest on Hellenism after the re-discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics*, showing that Nietzsche's work was the main source for the development



of theoretical reflection on tragedy and for the practical wish to write modern tragedies in late 19th and 20th centuries. Frese Witt underlines Nietzsche's refusal of the Aristotelian view on tragedy and focus on the main argument of the *Birth of Tragedy*: the essence of tragedy is lyrical (not mimetic or dramatic) and it consists more in *pathos* than in *praxis* (13). The author argues that the *Birth of Tragedy* is not an historical drama itself, but a kind of anti or meta-aristotelic tragedy based on the repetition of an action whose tragic hero is tragedy itself (who dies from suicide as Nietzsche claims in chapter 11 of his book). Moreover, Frese Witt sees a direct filiation between Euripides' realistic and epic drama, which emphasizes action, and naturalist and realist drama of the 19th century, in which Dionysian *Rausch* is replaced by the imitation of everyday life and rational and optimistic resolutions of existential problems. She continues with presenting a genealogy of the influence of Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy in France, Italy, Scandinavia,

Germany, Great Britain and the USA, proving that the Nietzschean hope for a rebirth of tragedy was seriously taken by a variety of artists and thinkers and opened the way for new experiences and understandings of tragic and aesthetic creation.

The general intention of the volume is widely fulfilled showing the variety of the effects Nietzsche had and continues to have over different artists of different countries working with different artistic means. Furthermore, the essays show clearly that Nietzsche's influence on the modern understanding of tragedy does not reduce itself to the impact *The Birth of Tragedy* had, but can also be explained by the effects caused by the reading of Nietzsche's latter works. It should be said, though, that the essays present different levels of quality in terms of philosophical interest, perhaps because some were written by art or literature scholars. In fact, the first three chapters are devoted to the influence of Nietzsche's conception of tragedy in three writers: Strindberg, D'Annunzio, and W.B. Yeats. In the first essay, "*Pausing before Being: Nietzsche, Strindberg and the Idea of Tragic*" (40-71), Michael Stern argues that for the mature Nietzsche tragedy is the collision between inherited narratives and the construction of a narrative of the self which stops before ending, that is to say, tragedy is "the story of the ironic subject of modernity" (43). Focusing on Nietzsche's later works, the author argues that in the absence of God the modern subject must become retrospective, he is the doer who is poeticized back into the deed and creates a "genealogy of self," a "hermeneutic construction based on retrospection" (48) in which the nihilistic self overcomes the vacuum of self-creation ex nihilo interpreting the past in a gesture of eternal return. By means of repetition, parody, and irony the self created must be overcome time and time again. Stern continues with showing the influence of Nietzsche on August Strindberg's novel *By the Open Sea* and on Strindberg's autobiography, *Son of a Servant*, arguing that for both authors the problem of overcoming dual origins was an aesthetic process of selection and description and concluding that for Nietzsche and Strindberg subjectivity was "a pausing before being in the form of a genealogical moment" (64). The following essay, "*D'Annunzio's Dionysian Women: The Rebirth of Tragedy in Italy*" (72-103), addresses the influence of Nietzsche on Gabriele D'Annunzio. The author is the editor of the volume, Mary Ann Frese Witt, and she argues that D'Annunzio understood Nietzsche's writings on tragedy along two main lines: a sexual reading of the Dionysian and the Apollinian, and the refusal mimesis in his own tragedies (72). Focusing on several D'Annunzio's plays such as *La Città Morta*, *La Gioconda*, *La Fiaccola sotto il Moggio* and *Più che l'Amore*, Frese Witt concludes that he rewrites the metatragedy of the problem of re-creating tragedy for modernity believing, as did Nietzsche, that ancient drama represented more pathos than mimesis and that tragedy should privilege the aesthetic over the moral (98). The next essay, entitled "*Lidless Eyes, Stony Places, Vibrant Spectators: Nietzschean Tragedy in Yeats's Lyric Poetry*" (104-125), focuses on the impact Nietzsche had on the poet W.B.

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Yeats. John Burt Foster Jr. argues that Yeats was deeply fascinated by Nietzsche's interest on the audience for tragedy (understood as cosmic-metaphysical spectacle) and by the paradox which made possible that tragedy's sudden revelation of cosmic horror need not result in hopelessness, but could instead create a compensatory mood of emotional vibration or "fulness of life" (105). The author underlines the influence that the reading of *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Genealogy of Morals* had on Yeats and he analyzes several of his poems and parts of his autobiography showing that Yeats was more concerned with an ideal of a tragic spectator who responds to metaphysical terror with fulness of heart than with the possibilities of Irish cultural renewal. The text concludes with the claim that Yeats went beyond Nietzsche witnessing the harshness of time and age and affirming the values of personal warmth and self-scrutiny.

The fourth essay makes a step out of the literary world and takes us to the realm of philosophy. In "*Groundlessness: Nietzsche and Russian Concepts of Tragic Philosophy*" (126-137), Edith W. Clowes focuses on the influence of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* in Russian philosophy of the 20th century. The author explains how the book was received in Russia by Lev Shestov, Nikolai Berdiaev, Aleksei Losev, and Merab Mamardashvili, claiming that Nietzsche's work and the concepts of tragedy and the Dionysian were decisive for such authors in spite of their different views on philosophic activity. Bettina Kaibach's text, "*The Gods are Evil*" (138-158) bring us back to literature, by focusing on the Czech novel *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* written by Jiri Weil (1900-1959) and showing how it abounds with allusions to *The Birth of Tragedy*. Kaibach presents the different understandings of the concept of tragedy in Ricoeur, Walter Otto, George Syteiner, Leon Wumser, and Walter Benjamin and argues that only this concept can enlighten the peculiar situation of the Czech Jews who fell into the hands of the Nazis during II World War. This situation, which forced the Jewish community to organize its own extermination, is portrayed in Weil's novel where they become "guilty while innocent" (140). Kaibach claims that Weil shares with Nietzsche the idea of the impossibility of a moral justification of tragedy, although the Czech writer refuses an aesthetic justification of the world being, therefore, also close to Walter Benjamin's conception of tragedy. The sixth essay, "*Nietzsche, Artaud and Tragic Politics*" (159-185), offers a political conception of tragedy. Geoffrey Baker compares Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and Antonin Artaud's *Le théâtre et son double*, arguing that both can be understood as models of politically transformative art when read through Adorno's philosophy of art (160). The author claims that both Nietzsche and Artaud's main concerns are the problem of knowledge and the criticism of Western systems of representation, and argues that the criticisms that Artaud addresses to narrative and psychologic theater in his book are comparable to the ones Nietzsche makes against aesthetic socratism in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Baker goes on suggesting that Nietzsche and Artaud face the problem of

representation demanding a new symbolic language (music and gesture against spoken or written speech) which would represent a rebirth of theatre with practical, political effects through “a remolding of the foundational structures of culture” (180). The two last essays of the volume focus on “moving pictures” (to use Deleuze’s expression). In “*Nietzschean Neurotheater: Apollinian and Dionysian Spirits in the Brain Matters of Our Town*” (186-218), Mark Pizzato analyzes the different screen versions of Thornton Wilder’s Play *Our Town*, claiming rather ambitiously that they display “a confrontation with particular ghosts, involving Apollinian and Dionysian structures within the human brain that produce ideologically diverse yet interrelated visions of life and death” (189). The author argues that Nietzsche’s Apollinian and Dionysian elements can be read in the light of recent neuroscientific research, and tries to prove that Nietzsche’s insights on tragedy receive confirmation in science and performance. The last essay of the volume presents a more convincing argument about the impact of Nietzsche’s tragic theory on cinema. Ronald Bogue’s “*Tragedy, Sight and Sound: The Birth of Godard’s Prénom Carmen from the Nietzschean Spirit of Music*” (219-248) applies Gilles Deleuze’s idea that in cinema music creates Dionysian images whose relationship with the visual, Apollinian ones is not one of correspondence, to the film *Prénom Carmen* directed by Jean-Luc Godard, concluding that this film is born of a Nietzschean spirit of music. The author shows that Godard’s use of sound and music establishes a non illustrative, non representational relationship with images in which the narrative is suspended and images emerge as “forms of visual music” (235).