

‘Faced with The Satyr’¹

Nietzsche’s Tragic Knowledge of Nature

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Abstract: Like all great books, *The Birth of Tragedy* is many things-different things to different readers: an amateur investigation into certain literary, aesthetic, and psychological trajectories in ancient Greek culture, Nietzsche’s first book, historical revisionism, a rough sketch of his future projects, philosophical fantasy, dubious scholarship (I am thinking here of Ulrich von Willamowitz-Moellendorff’s infamous rejection of the BT) and possibly an embarrassment to its writer. In the essay *An Attempt at Self-Criticism* that prefaces the 1886 edition, I find Nietzsche’s self-deprecating ‘criticisms’ above to be rhetorical and philosophical virtues rather than histrionic imperfections, but that is an argument for another day. The title of my paper is taken from section 8 of the BT where Nietzsche engages in a lengthy discussion of the role of the satyr, or goat song, in Greek culture. Following his brief, but superb and often quoted analysis of *Hamlet*. Nietzsche writes: “Faced with the satyr, cultured man shriveled to a mendacious caricature” (41) and later in the same section: “The idyllic shepherd of modern man is merely a counterfeit of the sum of educated illusions which modern man takes to be nature; the Dionysian Greek wants truth and nature at full strength” (43).

“...a lie is told which causes pain to disappear from the features of nature” - Nietzsche (BT 80)

“We shall never comprehend the supreme value of tragedy until like the Greeks, we experience it as the essence of all prophylactic healing energies...” - Nietzsche (BT 99)

At the beginning of Pasolini’s 1969 film *Medea* - after a centaur has instructed Jason, son of Aeson in agriculture and philosophy, we witness a Dionysian sacrifice both exhilarating and terrifying. A young Colchian boy is lead (possibly drugged) to a primitive crucifix of bleached, loosely girdled driftwood atop a hill where he is choked to death and his body hacked into pieces with a stone ax. His organs and entrails are distributed to eager peasants by a shaman/animistic priest who then blesses their spring harvest by rubbing bloody chunks of liver, heart, and lung on

sun scorched wheat shoot and olive branches. This scene is photographed ceremoniously with a combination of long tracking shots and quick cuts absent any dialogue or narration. We watch the grotesque ritual while a haunting score of North African tribal screams, chants and crude, tortured string instruments scratch our ears.

The film is a relic of counterculture surrealism - something a freshman film student might be instructed to write a term paper on in 1960's Italian Cinema 101. That said the film rehearses and performs many of the key arguments in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* with an eerie, almost uncanny precision. Pasolini offers his audience a revisionist, adumbrated adaptation of Euripides' play. His primary sources are the original Greek myths of Jason and Medea and the darker recesses of his own imagination. He exchanges most of the dialogue of the original play for images both grisly and elegantly Arcadian, but the presentation is arguably Dionysian. The centaur and apparent stepfather to Jason instructs the boy in the ways of the seed and of the necessity of myth in human life. He teaches about the evolution of primordial nature and ultimately, reveals to him the tragic wisdom that there are no gods. Jason sits silent under a mop of russet curls in a dirty loincloth with a vapid grimace plastered across his face. As years pass and the centaur trades his horse's ass for legs and transforms into man, Jason's chin whiskers grow into a bushy, glamorous mess. Armed with the newfound knowledge that the gods live only in myth, Jason-the-man-child can now begin his legendary *bildungsroman* quest for the Golden Fleece; a journey that may have dislodged Dionysian wisdom from Western civilization forever.

The grand irony of Pasolini's surreal, dreamlike vision of *Medea* is that in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche abhorred Euripides whom he referred to as "...the poet of aesthetic Socratism" (64). Nietzsche saw Euripides as the mortal enemy of Aeschylus because under the

spell of Socratic wisdom, he tipped the scales in the balance between Apollonian and Dionysian forces in favor of Apollo. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Euripides is cast as the dramatic manifestation of the Socratic man of dialectic and reason: the playwright as both instrument and purveyor of scientific knowledge. Jason's abduction of Medea from her tribal community thrusts her into a world of work and reason in the Greek polis of Corinth. In Pasolini's version, it is tempting to say that Jason represents what Nietzsche perceived as the: "...contrast between this genuine truth of nature and the cultural lie which pretends to be the only reality..." (41). By kidnapping the barbarian queen, forcing her to become a proper member of civilization and conferring upon her the duties of a good Greek wife, Medea must abandon the brutal, imaginary justice of her primitive culture that is steeped in myth, magic and Dionysian ecstasies. What was tragic for Euripides and his audience is the drama of domestic violence: the infanticide of Mermeros and Pheres, Medea's children with Jason. What is tragic from a Nietzschean perspective – and incidentally marks the core of my argument - is the very loss of tragic knowledge itself, along with our preternatural relationship to nature. When Medea escapes dramatically on her chariot of dragons via Euripides' contrived deus ex machina at the end of the play, it may signal our yearning to flee from the polis back to a primordial nature that no longer exists. Or as Nietzsche writes, perhaps more poetically: "It hardly seems possible to transplant a foreign myth to a new place with lasting success without doing irreparable damage to the tree in the process" (111).

Like all great books, *The Birth of Tragedy* is many things-different things to different readers: an amateur investigation into certain literary, aesthetic, and psychological trajectories in ancient Greek culture, Nietzsche's first book, historical revisionism, a rough sketch of his future projects, philosophical fantasy, dubious scholarship (I am thinking here of Ulrich von

Willamowitz-Moellendorff's infamous rejection of the BT) and possibly an embarrassment to its writer. In the essay *An Attempt at Self-Criticism* that prefaces the 1886 edition, Nietzsche writes:

“I declare that it is badly written, clumsy, embarrassing with a rage for imagery and confused in its imagery, emotional, here and there sugary to the point of effeminacy, uneven in its pace, lacking the will to logical cleanliness,...mistrustful even of the *propriety* of proving things,... ‘music’ for those who were baptized in the name of music,...(5-6).

I find Nietzsche's self-deprecating ‘criticisms’ above to be rhetorical and philosophical virtues rather than histrionic imperfections, but that is an argument for another day. The title of my paper is taken from section 8 of the BT where Nietzsche engages in a lengthy discussion of the role of the satyr, or goat song, in Greek culture. Following his brief, but superb and often quoted analysis of *Hamlet*. Nietzsche writes: “Faced with the satyr, cultured man shriveled to a mendacious caricature” (41) and later in the same section: “The idyllic shepherd of modern man is merely a counterfeit of the sum of educated illusions which modern man takes to be nature; the Dionysian Greek wants truth and nature at full strength” (43).

For Nietzsche, the satyr as mythological creature –not as a genre of Greek drama in this particular context- represents the Dionysian unity of nature, opposed to the principle of individuation of the Apollonian image-maker. (The Apollonian is signified by the plastic arts: sculpture, painting, etc. whereas the Dionysian is characterized by or expressed in music, dance and tragic drama). In Nietzsche's concept of the satyr I find the possibility, or see the potential for a heroic symbol to resist the complete domination of rational thought and our obsessive technocratic practices that may have led us to environmental ruin. In other words my thesis is that critically reexamining Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* may provide environmental

philosophy with a fresh, innovative way to rethink our looming ecological crises, and in the process define our current Anthropocene.²

As far as the ‘tragic knowledge of nature’ is concerned, it is unclear what Nietzsche means precisely when he uses the word nature, which appears dozens of times in the text. We may assume it is an odd mixture of Aristotle’s common definition of nature from his *Physics* as “the inner principle of change and being at rest or in motion.” In other places he may be invoking Spinoza’s *Natura Naturans* (nature naturing) and *Natura Naturata* (nature natured), or he could be referring to the poetic concept of *Phusis* from the *Orphic Hymn 10 to Phusis*. We know that Nietzsche clearly admired Emerson, so he may have his seminal essay *Nature* in mind where Emerson refers to nature as “...all that is not me...” One could justifiably assume the various conceptions of nature from German Romanticism, which undoubtedly influenced Nietzsche’s understanding of the word as well, specifically in his lamentation for Schiller’s lingering sentimentality in section 19 of *The Birth of Tragedy*. And of course, Schopenhauer’s philosophy of aesthetic pessimism is at the core of Nietzsche’s definition of nature. What we may glean explicitly in Nietzsche’s text is that with rise of Socrates’ philosophy in the form of the dialectic, the importance of tragic or Dionysian wisdom dissipated, became more and more marginalized and thus transformed Greek (and by extension our) relationship to the natural world. Nature may or may not have intrinsic value independently of human interests, but nature does not suffer, humans do. It is precisely tragic knowledge in the form of the musical arts – specifically Wagnerian opera for Nietzsche - that may help to rehabilitate and contribute to arguments in environmental philosophy and thereby help to alleviate our suffering.

² Relating to or denoting the current geological epoch/age -from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards - viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. It is a term first used in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, who shared a Nobel Prize for his work on the chemical mechanisms that affect the ozone layer.

But why, one may ask, does environmental philosophy (or humanity's place in nature for that matter) even need rehabilitation? Maybe Martin Drenthen posed the question more eloquently in his essay, *Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration*, when he asked: "How can environmental philosophy benefit from Friedrich Nietzsche's radical critique of morality?" (1). It is an extraordinarily vital and, I would argue, overlooked question that could furnish eco-philosophy with some heavy rhetorical ordnance. This paper does not seek to reread the quite expansive field of environmental philosophy via the lens of Nietzsche's entire corpus, much less offer a comprehensive engagement with his complex critique of morality. Nor is this paper a discussion of environmental ethics in the conventional sense. But, because I have not encountered any explicit treatment of the BT as a catalyst for environmentalism in any of my research, I am treading somewhat fresh waters. Thus my investigation must be relatively hermeneutic in its interpretive framework. What I am proposing, though not unequivocally, is that Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* is vastly underestimated book – many of its core theses unmined –and may be indeed read as a vigorous proto-environmental treatise. If I am working in any specific tradition, it is the possibly dangerous intersection between environmental aesthetics and a peculiar brand of environmental nihilism or pessimism. I also understand that to do so exclusively would be tragic. Thus where Nietzsche's investigation into the origins of ancient Greek tragic knowledge is epistemological and philological, I am playing more loosely with the concept. For the purposes of my argument, I would maintain that we have broken completely with our ability to understand nature tragically and thus broken with our capacity to confront potential extinction crises on our planet; crises that could signal our own annihilation.

Instead of a healthy admixture of Dionysus and Apollo, we now live in a purely Apollonian world of plastic images whether they take the traditional Greek form of paintings, sculpture or in twenty first century terms, the digital interface of smart phones, tablets and other personal electronic devices. Cooing over our technological achievements, we stare incessantly at blinking screens while the ‘natural world’ contorts and hurls (what we perceive) as natural disasters at us. While we are taking selfies of our latest hairstyles, the polar ice caps are receding. We then offer up the now customary thumbs up/thumbs down – liking or disliking what we see or read on social networks. We fancy ourselves expert curators of images, sounds and words passing aesthetic judgment on whatever flashes across the screen, whether it takes the form of political blogging, posting photos of our dog on Instagram, or making playlists of songs that accompany our every mood throughout the day. The problem is that without any objective criteria upon which to base those judgments or further teleological necessity to justify our lifestyle obsessions, we are just fools clicking away in cyberspace. The Kant of the third critique must be crying. Maybe Nietzsche is laughing. We are so removed from our own deaths via our mediated experience of the material/natural world that we cannot even begin to live and dance again. If there is anything to be gleaned from *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is that the division of the cosmos into man and nature is an arbitrary gesture for which we have Aristotle to thank. The human being’s experience of Dionysian ecstasy is merely one way in which nature expresses herself.

I am not advocating, rejecting or supplanting the arguments made by environmental ethicists. I am thinking here of the usual detours through deontology and utilitarianism; care ethics and virtue ethics. (Peter Singer, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Thoreau, etc.) What I am suggesting is that *The Birth of Tragedy* may assist, bolster and simultaneously offer constructive

criticism to those arguments. My purpose is to demonstrate that the BT may have something important to add to ongoing conversations in environmental philosophy, environmental science, Nietzsche scholarship and eco-literacy. After countless readings, I embrace fully its mythopoetic overtones and find myself submitting to its Dionysian wisdom, whether or not it is historically accurate. The text is what literary critic Harold Bloom – who deemed Nietzsche “the prophet of the antithetical” – would deem imaginative literature. In a sense I want to do *The Birth of Tragedy* literary and philosophical justice. It may on some level be a work of philosophical fantasy, but therein rests its power. And if, as Nietzsche proclaims, it is true that “art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life” then *The Birth of Tragedy* is a work of philosophical art in its own right, as well as an underappreciated essay of immense cognitive strength. The more I confront and reread it, the more I see its potential to confront environmental problems.

Nietzsche writes in section 23 of *The Birth of Tragedy* that “...Greek tragedy delayed the destruction of myth”(110). Is our own elegant repackaging of the latest incarnation of the green movement just another form of commodity fetishism temporarily delaying our own destruction? For Nietzsche, art is an illusion in its Apollonian form and because we find this imagistic illusion to be more seductive than the appeal of the natural environment, we all too often neglect or turn away from nature viewing her as merely an instrument to serve what Herbert Marcuse perceived as the false needs of the market and modern culture. According to Nietzsche, traditional ‘Socratic’ wisdom undermines aesthetic experience by using the logical contrivances of scientific knowledge to tame or pacify our instincts instead of using them constructively. In this sense, the BOT is a sort of literary precursor to Freud’s *Civilizations and Its Discontents*. Maybe with a little shove from Nietzsche towards a resuscitation of Dionysian-

Tragic knowledge, we could find the courage to turn off our iPods and listen again to the tragic choruses of nature. Tragic language, tragic thoughts and making room for environmental tragedy in our everyday lives not only occupies a place in environmental philosophy, but may lend to the sustainability of future discussions in eco-philosophy.³

The BT rehearses many of the problems facing contemporary environmentalism such as conservation, sustainability, energy concerns and mental ecology. Perhaps most importantly and most relevant to this paper, I am arguing that Nietzsche's discussion of the tension between what he identifies as Apollonian and Dionysian forces⁴ anticipates the imaginary separation between man and nature, thereby marking an original exchange of tragic knowledge in favor of Socratic wisdom. This tension was re-enacted or performed in the dramatic competition between Aeschylus and Euripides— or the metaphorical contest between Socrates and Dionysus for the souls of the Greek people. For Nietzsche, when Euripides supplants Sophocles as the new champion of drama, he turns his back on elements of our Dionysian instincts, and thereby signals the triumph of scientific knowledge in Western culture from which we are still reeling today. Nietzsche argues that we have tragically lost our capacity for what he calls “aesthetic listening” along with a diminished appetite for Dionysian intoxication. He writes in section 22:

“Thus along with the rebirth of tragedy, the aesthetic listener too is reborn” (106).

First and foremost, I do not want to reduce Nietzsche's definitions of the Apollonian and Dionysian to the superficial opposition between nature and culture or a cartoonish country mouse vs. the city mouse scenario as much environmental philosophy is accused of doing. Though tempting, I would also like to make it clear that I am not favoring the Dionysian over the

³ By ‘tragic’ I mean Nietzsche's various definitions of the word employed through the BOT.

⁴ In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche sometimes refers to Apollo and Dionysus as ‘art deities’, ‘drives’ (Triebe) or ‘art-worlds of *dreams* and *intoxication*’ respectively depending on the translation. I will use the different monikers interchangeably throughout the dissertation.

Apollonian and neither does Nietzsche. Both are equally crucial to Nietzsche's understanding of Greek subject formation and the cultural heritage of Western civilization. The problem for Nietzsche is that the Apollonian – in the form of Socratic/Euripidean forces – has completely overshadowed Dionysian or tragic knowledge. The moment Hellenic poetry was eclipsed by philosophy marked an irrevocable change in the course of Western culture. Again, in section 23 he writes: "...beneath this restlessly agitated cultural life and senseless education there lies hidden a magnificent, inwardly healthy, ancient strength" (109).

This legacy of an "agitated cultural life" has continued to define our relationship to the natural world for the last two thousand millennia. One might liken the Apollo/Dionysus distinction as I am reading it, to the difference between Deep Ecology and Shallow Ecology.⁵ Again, according to Nietzsche, the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian are aesthetic creations and reinforce the necessity of art in both mythmaking and metaphysics. Both drives also act as a buffer between humans and the metaphysical horrors of life's inevitable meaninglessness. Couched in these terms, it would not be outlandish to classify my project as a form of philosophical art therapy whereby pessimistic, tragic knowledge has the potential to rehabilitate the natural world through licking the wounds logical, 'optimistic' reason has inflicted upon her. In section 15 of the BT, Nietzsche triumphantly announces the return of Dionysus whose curative powers are offered up in the form of an aesthetic tonic:" a noble and gifted man...sees how logic curls up around itself at these limits and finally bites its own tail, then a

⁵ Peter Singer offers a succinct explanation of what is a complex environmental theory in the second edition of his *Practical Ethics*: "The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess wrote a brief but influential article distinguishing between 'shallow' and 'deep' strands in the ecological movement. Shallow ecological thinking was limited to the traditional moral framework; those who thought in this way were anxious to avoid pollution to our water supply so that we could have safe water to drink, and they sought to preserve wilderness so that people could continue to enjoy walking through it. Deep ecologists, on the other hand, wanted to preserve the integrity of the biosphere for its own sake, irrespective of the possible benefits to humans that might flow from so doing" (280).

new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic knowledge*, which simply to be endured, needs art for protection and as medicine” (75).

This a sentiment perhaps better expressed by Russian composer Igor Stravinsky who claimed: “To be deprived of art and left alone with philosophy is to be close to hell.” Such a sentiment, while combative, is not meant to be anti-philosophical, but merely a reminder that a healthy philosophical diet is nourished by both art and myth just as much as rational thought. One could easily make or envision a counter argument against Nietzsche and my project and claim that the Socratic position is better suited to environmental studies. It might read something like: If we were all virtuous knowledge seekers who subscribe to the virtuous life as advanced countless times by Socrates and Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, then we might not be in the mess we are in today. I can just hear the ancient scholars yelling, “I told you so!” If we had not been so seduced by the world of material appearances, guided by our lust for things, directed by our greed, and controlled by and slaves to our desires/appetites/passions; if we were more committed to eudemonism then maybe we could avoid ecological catastrophe. Dialectic may be greener than tragic wisdom and the Socratic way may be more sustainable thus leaving a smaller carbon footprint. Besides, if we conquer the fear of death like Socrates, then who cares if the species goes extinct. But Nietzsche’s argument is that we have already trodden that path – already applied the dialectic to all areas of social and political life and it resulted in what he perceived as the prosaic mono-culture of late nineteenth century Europe.

Samuel Beckett said: “Dance first, think later. That is the natural order of things.” Tragic wisdom indeed... Nietzsche’s treatment of the Dionysian and the Apollonian duality at the core of *The Birth of Tragedy* may provide some psychological insight into his idealization of Greek tragic culture, whose strength he so admired because he himself was physically weak and

emotionally distressed by the contingencies of his own life. Accompanied by Wagner's music and the elegiac wails of the Chorus, he found in the romantic trope of the Homeric warrior-poets in Greek tragedy, necessary armaments to begin his insurgency against Western values, which would reverberate throughout all his writings.

We look around in vain for just one root bearing vigorous branches, for a single patch of fertile and healthy soil; wherever we look, we see only dust, sand, petrification, things dying from thirst.... But how suddenly the wilderness of our tired culture, which we have just painted in such gloomy colours, can be transformed, when it is touched by Dionysiac magic! (BT 97-98).

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