

# **PYGMALION, AGAMBEN AND THE MYTH OF NIETZSCHEAN AESTHETICISM**

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The Nietzschean reading of Kantian disinterestedness is something of a touchstone for Nietzsche's relationship with the aesthetic and philosophical traditions he both follows on from and strives to repudiate. Not only is it symbolic of his rejection of a kind of art, but also of a kind of philosophy. Aesthetic disinterestedness denies the perspectival nature of seeing and is therefore a conceptual nonsense, the argument runs. Our interpretations could no more abstain from being additive and affective than we could cease to be perceiving subjects at all. As Zarathustra says:

But now your emasculated leering wants to be called 'contemplation'! And that which lets cowardly eyes touch it shall be christened 'beautiful'! Oh, you befoulers of noble names!

But it shall be your curse, you immaculate men, you of pureknowledge, that you shall never bring forth, even if you lie broad and pregnant on the horizon! (TSZ, 145-146).

A few lines on, Nietzsche mischievously reminds us why disinterestedness should be quite so perfect a symbol and target:

But my words are poor, despised, halting words: I am glad to take what falls from the table at your feast.

Yet with them I can still – tell the truth to hypocrites! Yes, my fish-bones, shells and prickly leaves shall – tickle hypocrites' noses! (146).

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The feeble collection of leaves, seashells and natural patterns – less that of an amateur botanist, perhaps, than that of a child - which Kant gathers in his *Critique of Judgement* to illustrate his ideas about disinterestedness, purposiveness and other pillars of his aesthetic theories are here ridiculed with vicious sarcasm by Nietzsche.

In *The Man Without Content*, Giorgio Agamben, however, is interested in another aspect of disinterestedness, quoting at length another important passage in GM III, but suggesting it represents even more dramatic a turn in the revaluation promised by Nietzsche. It is that in which Nietzsche contrasts Kant's "pleasure without interest" with Stendhal's "*promesse de bonheur*". "Who is right" asks Nietzsche, "Kant or Stendhal?" The passage ends:

If our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favour that, under the spell of beauty, one can *even* view undraped female statues 'without interest,' one may laugh a little at their expense: the experiences of *artists* on this ticklish point are more 'interesting' and Pygmalion was in any event *not* necessarily an 'unaesthetic man' (GM 104-105).

Nietzsche's choice and decision concerning the Kant-Stendhal dichotomy represents, says Agamben, a 'purification' of the traditional perspective in the work of art: 'art leaves behind the neutral horizon of the aesthetic and recognises itself in the "golden ball" of the will to power.' And more noteworthy even than the theme of the tickling of Kant's nose and laughter at his expense that characterises Nietzsche's position for Agamben is the invocation of Pygmalion, the artist whose statue Aphrodite brought to life as Galatea. This, says Agamben,

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represents Nietzsche's turn from an aesthetic focused on the viewer to a post-aesthetic determination of an art for artists:

Pygmalion, the sculptor who becomes so enamoured of his creation as to wish that it belonged no longer to art but to life, is the symbol of this turn from the idea of disinterested beauty as a denominator of art to the idea of happiness, that is, of an unlimited growth and strengthening of the vital values, while the focal point of the reflection of art moves from the disinterested spectator to the interested artist (Agamben, 2).

Sexual wish-fulfilment lies behind the transformation of Pygmalion's creation into Galatea, suggests Nietzsche, the transformation being therefore a decidedly interested one. But, as with many of Nietzsche's most arresting images, we can all too easily gloss over deeper, less obvious and sometimes even unintended meanings. Exploring Agamben's picture of Nietzsche's Pygmalion can suggest some alternative strands to Nietzsche's aesthetics, less in keeping with the 'aestheticist Nietzsche' that Agamben delivers to us, more attuned perhaps to a Nietzsche whose position on art always, in fact, defies such a characterization.

If Pygmalion's creation of his statue is an expression of sublimated sexuality, it might also be the expression of other impulses that Nietzsche recognised as being intrinsic to artistic creation too. Some versions of the myth have Pygmalion disgusted with women, others that he found them immoral, while Ovid's has it that he was simply 'not interested in women'. Whatever the case, there is undoubtedly a strand in all of them of what Zarathustra, in rebuking the old sorcerer, or poet, for his artistic offerings in Part IV of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, refers to as 'disgust' [*Eke!*] as its 'single truth', and what Nietzsche variously describes as the artist's flight 'to escape into forgetfulness', or fight

‘against a long nausea’ (BGE 269). If Nietzsche’s artist is all too often the child (HATH I 159; KGW VII 25 [386]), the world-weary ascetic, the ‘valet of some morality’ (GM III 5) or the ‘smallest fulfiller’ (KGW VII 35 [74]; VII 26 [242]) – as he is - he is also, quite as often, the collaborator with some of the basest instincts of the audience, the consumers or the ‘recipients’ of art (HATH II II 170; see esp. GM III 5). Indeed, Pygmalion’s relationship to his statue, once created, can all too easily be recognised in Nietzsche’s insistence in a *Nachlass* fragment that

‘...[i]n front of the work of art one can let go. In front of the great person one cannot! Therefore the cultivation of the arts by the subjected [*Unterworfenen*] who *create* for themselves [*sich schaffen*] a world of freedom’ (KGW VII 25 [317]).

And indeed in his published suggestion that

‘[n]ow one uses works of art to lure aside from the great *via dolorosa* of humanity those who are wretched, exhausted and sick and to offer them a brief lustful moment – a little intoxication and madness’ (GS, 89).

The artist here becomes ‘enamoured of his creation’ not because of its intrinsic beauty, as Agamben claims, but because of his world-weariness, his wish to turn away from the world *as it is*, and specifically, in this instance, from the women who inhabit it. Sublimating his nevertheless insistent desires, he in his frustration seeks another world beyond this one, one in which his freedom is, however, total. There is both sublimation and *ressentiment* in this move, a desire to revenge oneself on life such as to suggest that if Pygmalion was not necessarily an ‘unaesthetic man,’ as Nietzsche claims, then we might say neither was he

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necessarily an *interested* one in ways that Nietzsche would have considered life-affirming.

There is this thorough-going insistence in Nietzsche's text, one which I have described in more detail elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> that far from being, in Agamben's words, an urge towards 'an unlimited growth and strengthening of the vital values', the artistic impulse represents, in fact, a repudiation of these 'vital values':

'A true writer only bestows words on the emotions and experiences of others, he is an artist so as to divine much from the little he has felt. Artists are by no means men of passion but they often *pretend* to be ... deep rooted passion, passion which gnaws at the individual and often consumes him, is a thing of some consequence: he who experiences such passion certainly does not describe it in dramas, music or novels' (HATH I, 211).

Nor, one might say, in sculptures. Nietzsche, as he does here, repeatedly makes the sharp distinction between on the one hand 'life' and the 'vital values', and on the other, the experience and representation of those values, a disjunction of which the Pygmalion story might, in fact, be an illustration (see also HATH II I, 19; II, I 102; II, II, 309). He does so in order to argue against the pretensions of the artist and in order to ask us – the recipients of art – to question more thoroughly our own needs and expectations when we experience the works of artists. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche expresses this disjunction perhaps best of all when he refers to the point 'where art ends and life begins' (GS, 299). The instincts and passions of the artist are left behind by and can have no bearing on the exigencies and values of 'life' as Nietzsche understands this term. He writes in the *Nachlass*: 'The essential thing about the artist and genius: the actor. No

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<sup>1</sup> Pothen, P. *Nietzsche and the Fate of Art*. Ashgate, 2002.

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one possesses expression and feeling at the same time, words and reality' (KGW VII 25 [89]). Later in the Spring of 1887, in a fragment which begins with the words, 'Artists are not men of great passion, whatever they may like to tell us and themselves,' Nietzsche writes the following: 'one does not get over a passion by representing it: rather, it is over *when* one is able to represent it' (WP, 814). Artists sometimes deliberately take advantage of the confusion surrounding this distinction, but at other times dupe themselves. Either way, Nietzsche warns against *our* being duped:

'One should guard against confusion through psychological *contiguity*, to use a British term, a confusion to which an artist is himself only too prone: as if he himself were what he is able to represent, conceive and express. The fact is *if* he were it, he would not represent, conceive and express it: a Homer would not have created an Achilles nor a Goethe a Faust if Homer had been an Achilles or Goethe a Faust' (GM, III 4).

Nor, we might suggest, and to paraphrase Nietzsche, would Pygmalion have created a Galatea had he been equal to a Galatea.

If Nietzsche's aesthetic turn is one towards the artist, as Agamben wants to say – and we may want to agree – then the turn questions far more than merely Kantian or Schopenhauerian aesthetics – and, let us remember, it is Schopenhauer who is the real object of Nietzsche's argument in GM III 6. Given the points above concerning the artist's perhaps fatal decadence, the turn also questions, and this Agamben most certainly does not want to say, the very basis of the production of works, the very nature of artistic productivity, as expressed in the production of works of art. Neither should we necessarily take this as a valorization of a better *kind* of art, a non-Wagnerian kind for example, but rather

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understand that it is a call for a revaluation that would have art look like quite another thing altogether than 'our art' (HATH II 170). It is this insistence that 'aestheticist Nietzsches', Agamben's among them, repeatedly overlook or, worse, ignore.

It would not be entirely a point about Hellenic cosmology to see importance in the fact that most versions of the Pygmalion myth suggest that it is divine intervention that creates Galatea out of Pygmalion's inert statue, and specifically the intervention of Aphrodite. Not entirely, because this explanation also has important parallels with Nietzsche's own account of artistic productivity.

The relationship between art and religion is a complex one for Nietzsche. At times he uses art to counter what he takes to be the life-denying impulses of religion and specifically Christianity, as indeed he does in GM III 6 from which Agamben quotes. At other times, however, the question is less straightforward. In Part IV of TSZ, after Zarathustra has thrashed the Sorcerer for his poetry and has left the cave in disgust, the latter tries again with another poetic effort, but now directing against himself many of the arguments that Zarathustra had directed against the Sorcerer, and many that Nietzsche elsewhere charges the artist with, namely, the lying and 'deceit' [*Betrug*] of poets and artists, their pretensions to 'truth' and, crucially, their positing of a realm beyond this earth and their consequent denigration of *this* earth:

'The wooer of *truth*?' – so they jeered –  
No! Only a poet!  
An animal, cunning, preying, creeping,  
That has to lie,  
That knowingly, wilfully has to lie:

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Lusting for prey,  
Motley-masked,  
A mask to itself,  
A prey to itself –  
*That* – the wooer of truth?  
*No!* Only a fool! Only a poet!  
Only speaking motley,  
Crying out of fool-masks,  
Stalking around on deceitful word-bridges,  
On motley rainbows,  
Between a false heaven and a false earth,  
Soaring, hovering about –  
*Only* a fool! *Only* a poet! (TSZ, 308-9).

The false heaven and false earth between which the artist plays and, moreover, between which the artist in time *finds himself unable to distinguish*, might perhaps be best exemplified, one might suggest, not only by the Sorcerer but also by Pygmalion. Common to both, after all, is a disgust towards *this* world as well as a self-indulgent fantasy towards the other – the false heaven - which Nietzsche on many occasions points to as somehow definitive of artistic productivity. As early as 1873 he had written: ‘I hate that overleaping of this world which occurs when one condemns this world wholesale. Art and religion grow out of this’ (PT, 112). Later he writes that ‘[a]rt ties itself to piety’ (KGW IV 10 [13]), and later, again in the *Nachlass*, explores the ‘[r]elationship of art to the church’ (KGW VII 7 [7]) as well as the artist’s ‘dependency [*Abhängigkeit*] on church and moral law’ (KGW VII 34 [42]). Later still – in particular in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals* - this diagnosis is expanded further to question the role that deception plays in wider views about the artist, the power that is seen to become invested in the artist through this supposed vision of an ‘other world’, and how this power comes to convince us that the artist must speak from a

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vantage point, somewhere beyond, and how our consequent veneration [*Verehrung*] is not unlike a religious veneration (esp. BGE 289).

Such questions are intimately tied to the question of truth and illusion in Nietzsche's thought and although space precludes an exploration of this question here, there is a thorough-going insistence in Nietzsche's text that the artist, trapped between the two realms, unable to embrace either with conviction, and, in being so, justifying of Zarathustra's charge that he is 'not nearly true enough and not nearly false enough for me!' (TSZ 268), is at best a deeply ambiguous figure for Nietzsche, and at worst, one whose relationship to religion and godliness are deeply compromised.

Pygmalion, disgusted with flesh-and-blood women and possibly with the world around him, reinforcing a disjunction between 'art' and 'life' which buttresses this disgust, and elevated at the last through an 'overleaping of this world', presents quite a different picture to that offered by Agamben – and indeed by Nietzsche. For Nietzsche's part, his explicit condemnation of the artist and the work of art is repeatedly interlaced, as it is in GM III 6, with a more strategic use of art and the artist, as a weapon which he can brandish against Christianity. Stendhal's "*promesse de bonheur*", flung at Kant but actually a prelude to an assault on Schopenhauer's view that the work of art quieted and gave rest from the sexual drive, is one of the more prominent texts, of which there are in fact remarkably few, in which Nietzsche appears to valorize art and the artist. There are even fewer in which Nietzsche does not also use art simply as a means of railing against Christianity. Far more often, he wants to say that art is another

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expression of the 'Christian-moral ideal' in disguise (WP 340), that the work of art is compromised by its publicness and therefore godliness (GS 367; WP 841; BGE 26, 41, 44), that there is a species-likeness between the artist and the *ressentiment*-driven saint (GS 89; BGE 289; KGW VII 25 [317]; KGW VIII 5 [99]), and that decadence is quite as much an artistic and cultural phenomenon as it is a religious one.

Agamben, however, like many before him, takes Nietzsche's broadside against Kant, as well as the image of Pygmalion, to represent an explicit and decided revolution in favour of 'the artist'. While we might want to agree that Nietzsche introduced an artist's perspective into philosophical aesthetics, this is not the same thing as saying he *replaced* the traditional orientation with an artist-centred approach, nor, as we have seen, that this in any case or any sense introduced a necessarily healthier sensibility to aesthetic or artistic endeavours, even by Nietzsche's own account. The artist is deeply implicated in the self-same economies of *ressentiment*, decadence and godliness as the recipients of art, and is enslaved to his public to quite the same extent as the public is in thrall to his works. This knot of genealogies, whose economy Nietzsche ruthlessly exposes, gives the lie to Agamben's and others' claims of 'aestheticism' for Nietzsche which I take to mean, broadly speaking, that interpretation of Nietzsche's thought that has him valorize art as a standard against which he believes we should strive to live our lives. There are undoubtedly many quite different strands to such an underlying assumption about Nietzschean aesthetics, but it is common, if not to all, then to most, interpretations over a century and

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more of Nietzsche scholarship that Nietzsche is taken to have raised art to that standard and measure. From the earliest interpretations of both Nietzsche and Zarathustra as prophetic 'poet-philosopher', to Bäumler's and Heidegger's strong emphasis on the Will to Power's expression as art, Kaufmann's post-war valorization of the Apollinian, French or post-structuralist interpretations of the creativity inherent in Nietzsche's thought, to more recent Anglo-Saxon readings of Nietzsche's thoughts on art, by Nehamas, Young and others, this assumption has gone largely unchallenged. That I believe Nietzsche was as clear as he could be in arguing firmly against this assumption should be clear from the foregoing discussion.

If Agamben's analysis follows all too closely this overarching pattern, there are however areas in which he understands the radical transvaluation that Nietzsche's thoughts on art calls for. For, freed of the economies of spectator/work and artist/public, Nietzsche now calls for an acceptance of the Dionysian as 'the supreme deed' (EH XI 6). Having declared in *The Case of Wagner* that 'no god can save music' (CW Second Postscript), he now writes: 'I have in the end no reason whatever to renounce the hope for a Dionysian future of music', but only on this condition: '... the supreme art in the affirmation of life, tragedy, will be reborn when mankind has behind it the consciousness of the harshest but most necessary wars *without suffering from it*' (EH VI 4). Whatever this extraordinary precondition might mean, it is clear from this and other late passages that this music, tragedy, art - if it can be called such - that Nietzsche now envisions must preclude the presentative, instantiative means by which the

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work of art comes to us *as work*, that the kind of art that Nietzsche cannot finally renounce will be a very different art to *our* arts (HATH II 170; GS 89; GS Preface 4; TI XI 3), that the artist, no longer even the ‘bridge to a truly liberating philosophical science’ as he had been earlier (HATH I 27), is to renounce his arts and become a ‘penitent of the spirit’ (TSZ 152). Not only must we understand the near-impossibility of this promise and this vision – even if we decide finally to reject it - but also the ‘downgoing’ - the *Untergehen* - that must, Nietzsche insists, come before it.

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