NIETZSCHE ON SUFFERING, AFFIRMATION, AND MODERN TRAGEDY

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Mary Kate Brennan
May 2019

Examining Committee Members:
Dr. Kristin Gjesdal, Advisory Chair, Philosophy
Dr. Susan Feagin, Philosophy
Dr. Lara Ostaric, Philosophy
Dr. Andrew Huddleston, External Member, Birkbeck, University of London
Dr. Paul Kottman, External Member, The New School for Social Research
ABSTRACT

From the point of view of philosophy of art, tragedy is deeply perplexing: On the one hand, it depicts events that are painful, depressing, and difficult to watch. On the other, it is a genre that has been continually replicated, revered, and even enjoyed since the ancient Greeks. Writers like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Beckett hold a place of high regard—they are authors of important works and worthy of our attention. In contemporary aesthetics, this problem is referred to as the paradox of tragedy. This, though, is not a new problem. Instead, philosophers since Aristotle have asked why we, the human species, create, seek out, contemplate, and take pleasure in tragedy. In my dissertation, I examine Nietzsche’s response to this problem in The Birth of Tragedy. His answer is as simple as it is subtle: tragedy is valuable because it allows us to affirm life.

In his 1872 work, Nietzsche argues that tragedy was born out of the ancient Greek’s need to affirm life in the face of suffering. However, he is not entirely clear how, exactly, this affirmation is supposed to work. Put another way, the goal of my dissertation is to understand how tragedy can allow a spectator to find life valuable or meaningful, despite portraying actions and events that would seem to lead to the opposite effect. How can the end result of tragedy be an overcoming of suffering if its primary subject is pain and human misery? How can we walk away from Antigone’s needless death feeling that life is worth living?

In The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche famously claims that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified” (BT 24, see also BT 5). For
Nietzsche, art, at its best, has the potential to make life appear worth living—art can justify life. What remains unclear, however, is why the Greeks needed this justification of their lives in the first place. Nietzsche’s assertion about tragedy’s life-affirming abilities rests on an assumption, namely that life itself is something that needs justification. The dissertation begins with an account of why the life of the ancient Greeks need affirming to begin with, which I identify in Nietzsche’s famous recounting of the Wisdom of Silenus: “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 3). I continue by analyzing Nietzsche’s account of the ancient Greek response to this fundamental need: tragedy. In particular, I give an account of how, precisely, the Apolline and Dionysian artistic forces, which Nietzsche claims are combined harmoniously in tragedy, come together to provide the ancient Greek spectator with life affirmation.

Nietzsche’s discussion of tragedy is couched in terms of the ancient Greeks, focusing on tragedies that have a chorus. This seems to leave little room in his account for tragedies without a chorus. Interestingly, Nietzsche’s discussion of modern tragedy contains several mentions of Shakespeare. This is made more interesting by the fact that, in his preparatory notebooks, Nietzsche intended to include an entire chapter on Shakespeare in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but ultimately chose to leave it out. An analysis of Nietzsche’s comments on Shakespeare makes it possible to identify a different paradigm of tragedy, including a different mode of life affirmation, operative in Shakespearian tragedy. This alternative paradigm is better suited for speaking to audiences of Nietzsche’s own declining culture. In this way, Nietzsche’s writings on Shakespeare
highlight the historically sensitive nature of his theory of tragedy. While life affirmation may operate one way in ancient Greek tragedy, and in a similar way in Wagnerian opera, the cultural differences between ancient Greece and nineteenth-century Germany require different notions of life affirmation through tragedy. This project aims to show that despite leaving Shakespeare out of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche’s writings on Shakespeare can help us understand not only that art must be understood as situated culturally and historically, but also how life affirmation must change in different time periods and cultures.
For Buster and Biscuit.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have completed this dissertation without the guidance, mentorship, support, friendship, and love of numerous people. For this, I am deeply grateful.

First and foremost, I need to thank my dissertation adviser, Kristin Gjesdal for guiding me through this process. Without her consistent mentorship and support I would not be the scholar that I am today. Kristin has been incredibly generous with her time, offering thoughtful and thorough critiques of my work, providing me with priceless opportunities to meet other scholars working in my area, and offering a source of inspiration. I have been lucky to have her as a role model. She has taught me the importance of intellectual and personal generosity, work ethic, and attention to detail. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work as the editorial assistant to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* when Susan Feagin was Editor. When it came time to form my dissertation committee, Susan was kind enough to lend her expertise in the philosophy of tragedy to my project. In my time working with Susan at *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, she not only taught me the ins and outs of academic publishing, but was also generous enough to read and comment on my work. Her keen eye, sharp mind, and gregarious nature made her a pleasure to work with and learn from. My most sincere thanks go to Lara Ostaric for her comments, time, and support. I am grateful to Paul Kottman for lending his expertise to my project, which has benefited my research. I would also like to thank Andrew Huddleston for his encouragement and thoughtful commentary on my work. His writing on Nietzsche has been a model for my own.
Current and former members of the Temple University Philosophy Department have been supportive, welcoming, and encouraging. In particular, I would like to thank Miriam Solomon, department chair and former director of graduate studies, for her guidance and assurance throughout my time in the program. Espen Hammer, Colin Chamberlain, Owen Ware, and David Wolfsdorf all deserve thanks for generously providing feedback and guidance on my work. I would also like to thank Peter Logan and Petra Goedde at The Center for Humanities at Temple, where I was fortunate enough to spend two years as a fellow.

My fellow graduate students have made a huge impact on my life at Temple. My endless thanks go to Meryl Llumba, who copy-edited this dissertation and provided comments on earlier versions of this work. James Taplin has been a wonderful friend; his decision to write his dissertation on Nietzsche only made our friendship stronger. I would like to thank John Dyck, who started the graduate program the same year as me, for his constant emotional support and friendship. Former Temple student and self-professed Nietzsche-enthusiast, Tom Hanauer has been an invaluable intellectual support, not to mention wonderful friend. In general, the community of graduate students has made Temple a wonderful place to be.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I would like to thank my family. When I was trying to decide between following in my father and grandfather’s footsteps and becoming a lawyer or my pursuing my own passion for philosophy, my parents are the ones who convinced me to pursue the latter. They have always been there for me and supported me in whatever I wanted to do. I’d like to thank my sister, Allison, for being an
amazing sibling and for being interested in (or at least pretending to be) what I have to say about philosophy. My husband, Daniel, has been a constant support throughout this process and has consistently put up with me during all of the natural periods of frustration and anxiety that are part of graduate school. Finally, I want to thank my furry little research assistants, Buster and Biscuit, who have quite literally kept me company during the writing of this dissertation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. THE WISDOM OF SILENUS: SUFFERING IN <em>THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LIFE JUSTIFICATION THROUGH TRAGEDY</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. APOLLO’S EXIT: AFFIRMATION AND ILLUSION BEYOND <em>THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY</em></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ART, AFFIRMATION, AND SHAKESPEARE: A NEW PARADIGM</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ET TU HAMLET?: NIETZSCHEAN REVALUATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation traces the intersection of art and life affirmation in Nietzsche’s writings. Nietzsche begins his career with *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he praises the tragedy of ancient Greece for its ability to justify life in the face of suffering. While Nietzsche starts with a discussion of tragedy, he abandons his interest in it in his later writings. One thing that he does retain from his early attention to tragedy is a basic concern with life affirmation, or the question of how we should go about finding life worth living. On my reading, Nietzsche’s discussion of tragedy has less to do with it as a genre of dramatic form and more to do with the cultural conditions of ancient Greece that allowed it to flourish.¹ For the early Nietzsche, the importance of tragedy is contingent on the fact that it was a part of a particularly healthy and life affirming culture. Ancient Greek tragedy is remarkable for Nietzsche because it is capable of providing its audience with metaphysical solace: “the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable” (BT 7). Nietzsche’s theory of life affirmation undergoes a subtle shift from his early to his late writings. His conception of life affirmation transforms from one that functions by means of ancient Greek tragedy and culture to one that functions by means of a direct confrontation with suffering. In his late writings, Nietzsche ultimately makes a switch from an emphasis on a

¹ J. P. Silk and M. S. Stern make a similar argument in *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): “The young classical scholar writes a book about tragedy that looks outwards beyond the tragedies of his beloved Greeks. Its further target, however, is not later drama, but a philosophy of life. Though he makes a determined attempt to see tragic form as a criterion of the tragic outlook, the two are separable, and it is ultimately the outlook, not the form, that concerns him. This is not in the end a genre study” (280).
great culture of the past (ancient Greece) to the declining culture of the present (Nietzsche’s nineteenth-century Germany).

Nietzsche’s theory of life affirmation has been approached from a number of different angles. One approach, taken up by Bernard Reginster, bases the theory of life affirmation on Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power, which, he argues, explains how it is possible to revalue suffering: to come to see it is as necessary and even desirable. On Reginster’s account, “The affirmation of life results from a revaluation of the nihilist’s life-negating values.” Others, like Andrew Huddleston, approach the topic of life affirmation through Nietzsche’s notions of eternal recurrence and amor fati. Huddleston argues that affirmation is a “full-blooded affective attitude toward one’s life and existence” tied closely to a “kind of love, in particular noting that one’s reaction of affirmation toward the eternal recurrence is rooted in amor fati—love of fate.” Simon May defines life affirmation with reference to justification, arguing that affirmation is genuine only when one can take “joy in one’s life’s there-ness without seeking to justify suffering as constitutive of one’s supreme goals or as otherwise essential to their attainment.” Another way of understanding life affirmation is by looking at Nietzsche’s

---

2 Bernard Reginster, The Affirmation of Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Reginster argues: “The doctrine of the will to power radically alters our conception of the role and significance of suffering in human existence. If, in particular, we take power—the overcoming of resistance—to be a value, then we can see easily how it can be the principle behind a revaluation of suffering” (177).

3 Reginster, The Affirmation of Life, 266.


theory of human greatness. For Nietzsche, great individuals are the type of individuals who can affirm life, so understanding human greatness can tell us something important about life affirmation. Still others look at it through the lens of Nietzsche’s theory of eternal recurrence.

In this dissertation, I attempt a different approach to Nietzsche’s mature theory of life affirmation. This approach takes seriously Nietzsche’s early association of art and affirmation in The Birth of Tragedy and extends it to his late writings. I do this in two parts. The first half of the dissertation addresses Nietzsche’s theory of life affirmation through tragedy in The Birth of Tragedy. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche famously argues that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified” (BT 5). A primary task of The Birth of Tragedy is to show how this is possible. Nietzsche focuses on ancient Greek tragedy as a paradigm case of artwork that justifies life. But tragedy, of course, depicts painful, horrifying, and sad events, begging the question of why tragedy, of all art forms, is the paradigm case for aesthetic justification. According to Nietzsche, “tragic myth in particular must convince us that even the ugly and disharmonious is an artistic game which the Will, in the eternal fullness of its delight, plays with itself” (BT 24). In other words, tragedy must convince us that, even in the face

---


8 Nietzsche repeats this claim in section 24: “only as an aesthetics phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified.”
of the ugly and disharmonious, life is worth living. In the first half of my dissertation, I analyze how, on Nietzsche’s theory, tragedy is capable of doing this.

The second half of my dissertation looks at the relationship between art and life affirmation in Nietzsche’s mature thought. While Nietzsche retains an interest in art and creativity throughout his career, his interest in particular art forms, especially tragedy, diminishes. What remains an open question, however, is whether or not art retains its life affirming powers in Nietzsche’s mature writings. An analysis of Nietzsche’s comments on Shakespeare’s tragedies, which he takes not only to be examples of great art, but also to contain characters who exemplify human greatness, can allow us to answer this question. On my reading, Nietzsche’s comments on Shakespeare reveal a modern paradigm of life affirmation through tragedy that functions differently than ancient Greek tragedy.

The turn to Shakespeare might seem an odd move, but there are good reasons for making it. Nietzsche’s early notebooks indicate that Shakespeare was on Nietzsche’s mind when he was preparing to write *The Birth of Tragedy*. This is evidenced by his original intention, in his early notebooks, to include an entire chapter on Shakespeare.9 While the text of *The Birth of Tragedy* is focused on the works of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Wagner, Nietzsche’s early thinking on Shakespeare reveals that his thinking on tragedy extends beyond ancient Greek tragedy and Wagnerian opera. Further, throughout Nietzsche’s writings, Shakespeare is an exemplar of human greatness.10 For Nietzsche,

9 See WEN 7 [130].

10 See, for example, WP 966, EH “Why I am So Clever” 4, GS 98, D 240.
human greatness is associated with life affirmation: one of the primary reasons great individuals are great is their unique ability to affirm life. Shakespeare is uniquely relevant for understanding Nietzsche’s mature theory of art and life affirmation because Nietzsche praises Shakespeare for being the type of person who is capable of creating life-affirming characters, including Julius Caesar, Brutus, and (sometimes) Hamlet, who stand in as exemplars of human greatness. An analysis of Nietzsche’s take on Shakespeare is an inquiry into how exemplars can appear in art. This is pertinent for understanding if art, after Greek tragedy, can be life affirming.

***

Nietzsche’s early writings on tragedy are contained in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. *The Birth of Tragedy* is a famously troubled book. In his later self-criticism, Nietzsche himself calls it “impossible,” “badly written, clumsy, embarrassing,” and “odd and rather inaccessible” (BT “Attempt” 1-3). In its reception it was panned in an initial review by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, who was harshly critical of the overall project, citing it as problematic on historical and philosophical grounds.11 Looking at the book as a whole, one of its major problems is that it is couched as a genre study of tragedy, but its assessment does not seem to apply to any type of tragedy other than ancient Greek (with the exception of Wagnerian opera, which, too, is described in Greek terms). One of the purposes of this dissertation is to demonstrate, despite these problems, that Nietzsche’s early theory of tragedy is less troubled than it first appears. Instead, I

argue, it is essential for understanding Nietzsche’s account of life affirmation in both his early and late writings. While Nietzsche’s first book may be a meditation on a particular genre (ancient Greek tragedy), I contend that its implications extend far beyond the tragic form.

Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* tells the story of the birth, death, and subsequent re-birth of tragedy, which he views through the lens of two different drives, the Apolline and the Dionysian. For Nietzsche, the Apolline represents the drive towards beauty, dreams, individuality, distinction, and order, while the Dionysian represents liberation from individuality, intoxication, joy, and the forgetting of the self. For Nietzsche, the Dionysian is a collective, an unindividuated unity representative of a state of nature that lacks the individualizing forces that Nietzsche characterizes as Apolline. Tragedy is born of the interplay of these forces and is perfected when they are combined in a harmonious union—for Nietzsche, this harmonious union can be found in ancient Greek tragedy. While tragedy is marked by their interplay, the Apolline and Dionysian are each representative of their own forms of art. Sculpture and epic poetry (like that of Homer) are the purest forms of Apolline art. Music is the purest form of Dionysian art. For

---

12 Nietzsche describes the difference between the Dionysian and the Apolline as follows: “In order to gain a closer understanding of these two drives, let us think of them in the first place as separate art-worlds of dream and intoxication. Between these two physiological phenomena an opposition can be observed which corresponds to that between the Apolline and the Dionysiac” (BT 1).

13 In the very beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as “the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos” (BT 1).
Nietzsche, the music is typically responsible for presenting the Dionysian aspects of the tragedy, the words and characters present the Apolline.\textsuperscript{14}

The major themes of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} include, but are not limited to tragedy. The book is also largely concerned with the flourishing of culture and society. Nietzsche looks to ancient Greece as an example of a society whose art, religion, and culture were unified in a way that is impossible in modernity. In this way, Nietzsche’s early interest in ancient Greece is not purely philological (Nietzsche began his career as a professor of classical philology at Basel). It is also influenced by his concerns about his own, nineteenth-century Germany. Nietzsche hopes that the spirit of ancient Greece can be reborn in his own time, allowing for a revitalization of culture. In \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, Nietzsche hopes that Wagner’s operas can revitalize the spirit of tragedy in the modern age. Another major theme of the book asks whether or not life is worth living. Nietzsche’s early existential concerns are a cornerstone of his mature thought on life affirmation. For the ancient Greeks, the worry about the meaning and value of life is ameliorated by their art, religion, mythology, and tragedy.

The greatest influences on \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} are, arguably, Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner. Nietzsche was a personal friend of Wagner and an admirer of his music. While Nietzsche was writing \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, he spent a lot of time at the Wagner residence. Wagner, too, was busy writing an essay on Beethoven and

\textsuperscript{14} Nietzsche associates the chorus with the Dionysian and the Apolline with the dialogue of tragedy: “This insight leads us to understand Greek tragedy as a Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again in an Apolline world of images. Thus the choral passages which are interwoven with the tragedy are, to a certain extent, the womb of the entire so-called dialogue, i.e. of the whole world on stage, the drama proper” (BT 8).
their mutual enthusiasm for the power of music is intertwined in each of their works of this period. Wagner and Nietzsche also shared an enthusiasm for the philosophical pessimism of Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer argues that the world as we know it, the world in which objects appear in space and time, is nothing but representation. The appearance of our everyday world is an illusion generated by the “will,” a metaphysical entity that comprises the underlying reality of the world, which is characterized by a lawless, endless striving. The metaphysical will appears in our everyday experiences as our individual acts of willing. For Schopenhauer, to will is to suffer. This is because “all willing springs from lack, from deficiency.”\(^{15}\) As an expression of the ever-striving will, finite human life is filled with suffering. The fact that we humans are (nothing other than) manifestations of this blind striving means that we are in a constant state of desire. The will manifests itself in everyday existence in various ways, for example in sexual desire and hunger. When we are hungry, we experience frustration at our lack of food. This experience of hunger is mitigated when we eat, but is immediately replaced by a feeling of boredom. These desires can be fulfilled, but only temporarily. Thus, the only relief we get is momentary, partial, and fleeting. For Schopenhauer, the nature of the universe, which is constituted by the will, precludes the possibility of human happiness. He looks to art, in particular music, as a means for escaping, if only temporarily, the endless treadmill of suffering and boredom that is human existence. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche can be seen as responding to Schopenhauer’s pessimistic theory of human

existence. His youthful enthusiasm for Wagner’s opera and Schopenhauer’s faith in music as a palliative for the suffering of existence combine into some of the greatest influences on the early Nietzsche.

***

Throughout his career, Nietzsche makes allusions to many different artists, praising or criticizing them on various grounds. Some of Nietzsche’s most cited artists include Wagner, Beethoven, and Goethe. In this dissertation, I hope to bring one of Nietzsche’s other, less cited, interests to the fore: Shakespeare. Nietzsche’s interest in Shakespeare began long before he started his career as a philosopher. In 1860, when Nietzsche was sixteen, he wrote his mother asking for an edition of Shakespeare’s writings as a Christmas gift.16 His interest in Shakespeare can be traced to his time at boarding school at Pforta.17 While Nietzsche learned about Shakespeare at Pforta, he also took up his interest in Shakespeare independently of his academic requirements.18 His papers include eight pages of hand written excerpts from Shakespeare’s plays and a set of notes on *Macbeth*.19 In 1863, Nietzsche’s library contained a copy of Gervinus’ *Shakespeare*.20 In 1864, during the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare, Nietzsche played

---


18 See Large, “Nietzsche’s Shakespearean Figures,” 47.

19 See Large, “Nietzsche’s Shakespearean Figures,” 47.

20 See Large, “Nietzsche’s Shakespearean Figures,” 47.
Hotspur in a public reading of *Henry IV*.\(^\text{21}\) Nietzsche’s interest in Shakespeare does not end with his education in Pforta. Instead, it lasts throughout his entire oeuvre; mentions of Shakespeare appear from *The Birth of Tragedy* through *Ecce Homo*. However, the largest concentration of Shakespeare’s writings appears during his preparations for *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1870-71. In the final version of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche mentions Shakespeare several times, but does not offer any substantial discussion of the author.

It might be possible to write off Nietzsche’s use of Shakespeare as a conventional and convenient appeal to authority—Shakespeare, at the time, was looked to as a source of great art. Schopenhauer, who is generally considered to be one of Nietzsche’s greatest influences, draws on Shakespeare as a way of buttressing his arguments.\(^\text{22}\) However, Nietzsche’s notebooks, written prior to the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, reveal that Shakespeare plays a much more important role for Nietzsche than a mere appeal to authority.\(^\text{23}\) Instead, Nietzsche’s notebooks make it clear that he intended to include an


\(^{22}\) For an account of Schopenhauer’s interest in Shakespeare see Tom Stern, “Schopenhauer’s Shakespeare,” in *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jennifer Ann Bates and Richard Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). As Stern points out: “A frequent occurrence in Schopenhauer’s pose is the use of Shakespeare as an authority figure, who prefigures, in various quotations, thoughts to which Schopenhauer’s philosophy gave a clear expression, a conceptual formulation and a metaphysical underpinning” (57).

\(^{23}\) While one does not necessarily associate Nietzsche with Shakespeare, it is not at all odd that Nietzsche was concerned with this English author. Nietzsche is writing in the wake of a German obsession with Shakespeare. Not only were philosophers and academics arguing over the merits of Shakespeare’s work, but some even hoped to call Shakespeare an honorary German. Further, translations and productions of Shakespeare’s plays abounded in Germany during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The history of the German reception of Shakespeare is well documented. See Simon Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: Volume 1: 1586-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
entire chapter on Shakespeare in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but ultimately chose to leave it out.

Apollonian and Dionysian.
Lyric.
Tragedy. Tragic.
Dithyramb.
The death of tragedy. Socrates: ‘What was at issue was finding the tragic idea.’
Shakespeare: ‘The poet of tragic knowledge.’
Wagner. (WEN 7 [130])

This chapter list largely follows the trajectory of the final version of *The Birth of Tragedy*, with one exception: the chapter on Shakespeare. Nietzsche ultimately chose to leave a full discussion of Shakespeare out of *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, Nietzsche’s inclusion of Shakespeare in his notebooks speaks to the importance of the author for the genesis of this thinking on tragedy. Nietzsche’s thinking on Shakespeare is not limited to his early writings on tragedy, but appears throughout his entire career, culminating in a meditation on Shakespeare’s identity in *Ecce Homo*.

***

If we are to understand Nietzsche’s writings with reference to life affirmation, then we need to ask a fundamental question: why does Nietzsche think life needs affirming in the first place? Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche refers to life in many negative ways, citing the “burden and heaviness of being” (BT 18) and “the cruelty

---

24 Wagner’s “Beethoven” essay, which he composed at the same time Nietzsche was writing *The Birth of Tragedy*, contains a discussion of Shakespeare, linking the musical genius of Beethoven to the poetic genius of Shakespeare. See Richard Wagner, *Wagner’s Prose Works, Volume V: Actors and Singers*, trans, William Ashton Ellis (New York : Broude Brothers, 1896), 61-126.
of nature” (BT 7). In his description of the ancient Greeks’ awareness of suffering, Nietzsche tells the story of the wisdom of Silenus. Upon being asked by King Midas “what is the most excellent thing for human beings,” Silenus responds, “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 3). Silenus’ insight is, for Nietzsche, a popular piece of Greek wisdom, something that reveals that the “Greeks knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence” (BT 3). On my reading, an analysis of the wisdom of Silenus is essential for fully understanding the type of suffering that Nietzsche claims ancient Greek tragedy is capable of overcoming, so becoming clear about what, precisely, Nietzsche means by the wisdom of Silenus is key for an understanding of his early theory of life affirmation.

Chapter One examines what Nietzsche means when he recounts the wisdom of Silenus. I begin by reviewing two popular, but problematic, interpretations of Silenus’ wisdom. First, I consider the view that Silenus expresses a proto-Schopenhauerian truth about the world as “will.” I then review Bernard Reginster’s interpretation of the wisdom of Silenus as an early form of Nietzschean nihilism. As an alternative to these readings, I argue that, for Nietzsche, Silenus’ wisdom addresses a crucial, existential dimension of ancient Greek tragic culture. I conclude by pointing out that, in The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche locates nihilism not in the wisdom of Silenus, but in the advent of Socraticism.

Having analyzed the way ancient Greek society understood suffering, I turn to an analysis of the Greeks’ cultural antidote to the wisdom of Silenus: tragedy. In Chapter Two, I examine the way that tragedy functions as life-affirming for the ancient Greeks.
Nietzsche’s turn to tragedy as a paradigm of life justification is puzzling. Why turn to an art form that depicts sadness, horror, suffering, death, and despair to find meaning for life? This question, often called the paradox of tragedy, is a classical problem in aesthetics. Philosophers, following Aristotle and Hume, have been concerned about this interest in tragedy, asking how it is possible to take pleasure in it. While Nietzsche can be seen as participating in the discussion about the paradox of tragedy, his response ultimately undermines its central premise. Nietzsche is not as concerned with the pleasure one can derive from tragedy, as he is with how tragedy can allow one to affirm life.

In order to understand the way that tragedy affirms life, I begin by analyzing the two art-drives that Nietzsche uses to understand ancient Greek culture: the Apolline and the Dionysian. I begin by examining the way each of these drives affirm life on their own, before they are combined in tragedy. In doing so, I challenge a standard reading of how the Apolline and Dionysian affirm life. In interpretations of The Birth of Tragedy, more emphasis is generally placed on the life-affirming abilities of the Dionysian. I argue, instead, for the importance of Apolline affirmation. The Apolline is generally thought to affirm life through concealing or veiling an important truth about the world. This is sometimes viewed as problematic because it entails a form of affirmation that

functions by means of an evasion of suffering. On Nietzsche’s view, a genuine affirmation is one that allows one to embrace pain and suffering, not avoid it. I argue that this standard reading has it backwards—the Apolline does not operate merely by covering over unpleasant aspects of existence in order to make them more tolerable, but by providing a new perspective on the world that allows an individual to see even the suffering inherent in life as desirable or beautiful.

After analyzing how the Apolline and Dionysian art-drives affirm on their own, I continue by giving an account of how they come to be combined in tragedy. I consider three different types of interpretations of how the Apolline and Dionysian art drives affirm through tragedy. These three interpretations are distinguished by the different metaphysical commitments they take Nietzsche to hold in *The Birth of Tragedy*. I start by critiquing the view that Nietzsche maintains a Schopenhauerian metaphysics of the will. I continue by rejecting the idea that Nietzsche retains a robust metaphysical theory that has been adapted from, but ultimately differs from, Schopenhauer’s theory of the will. I argue, instead, that Nietzsche’s comments about the metaphysical solace that tragedy provides can be understood as a result of the ancient Greeks’ belief in the existence of a primordial unity. Ultimately, I claim that tragedy affirms by turning the spectator of ancient Greek tragedy into someone who can see the world through the perspective of an artist.

Chapter Three moves beyond *The Birth of Tragedy* and examines Nietzsche’s mature thinking about life affirmation. I begin by noting an interesting phenomenon in the progression of Nietzsche’s writings: after *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Apolline...
disappears, but the Dionysian remains as the ultimate affirmative symbol. In his mature writings, the Dionysian is no longer discussed in terms of art, but is understood in contrast to the life-denying culture of Christian-morality. In this chapter I attempt to answer two questions. First, how does Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian evolve from his early to late thought? Second, why does the Apolline drop out? In doing so, I analyze Bernard Reginster’s suggestion that the reason the Apolline disappears in Nietzsche’s mature thought is because he has changed his mind about the power of illusion to provide life affirmation. I contest this reading, arguing that Nietzsche’s estimation of the value of illusion does not fundamentally change between his early and late writings, but instead is an indication of the historical nature of his thinking. On my reading, Nietzschean life affirmation must be understood as historically situated. Affirmation in ancient Greek tragic culture is going to be vastly different from affirmation in the culture of modernity because of the varied social and religious practices of these eras. Nietzsche’s abandonment of the Apolline, then, should not be understood as a result of a change in Nietzsche’s belief in the affirming power of illusion, but as a consequence of his historical understanding of life affirmation.

In Chapter Four, I turn to Nietzsche’s views on Shakespeare as a paradigm of modern art and affirmation. After The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche’s discussion of life affirmation is no longer couched primarily in terms of art. While Nietzsche does retain an interest in art throughout his career, his late writings on art do not focus on a particular genre or example. Instead, they focus more on creativity and on the artists themselves. This is reflected in the scholarship, where Nietzsche’s theory of art is understood through
the perspective of the artist or by looking at the world as a work of art. In this chapter, I suggest a different approach. I propose a return to Nietzsche’s original strategy in *The Birth of Tragedy*: of beginning with an analysis of a specific example of (what Nietzsche deems “great”) art and using that to understand how that type of artwork reflects society in a life affirming way. I propose Shakespeare as this example. He is a figure who is always at the margins of Nietzsche’s thinking on life affirmation, both in his early and late writings. In his mature writings, Shakespeare appears as an exemplar of human greatness. Nietzsche associates human greatness with life affirmation, noting that exemplars of human greatness are great, in part, due to the fact that they are capable of taking an affirming stance on life. An analysis of Nietzsche’s comments on Shakespeare is useful for understanding not only the relationship between greatness and affirmation, but also the relationship between art and affirmation in Nietzsche’s mature writings.

I begin this chapter by addressing the interpretive issue of untangling Nietzsche’s seemingly contradictory remarks about Shakespeare in *The Birth of Tragedy* and the early notebooks. I argue that the best way to understand Nietzsche’s comments on Shakespeare is through the lens of his theory of human greatness. One of the consequences of Shakespeare’s greatness is his ability to resist the overwhelming cultural pressures of Christian morality. Shakespeare’s tragedies are great, for Nietzsche, in virtue of this resistance to morality. I conclude the chapter by asking whether, on a Nietzschean model, modern art has the potential to be life affirming. I argue that, while successful modern art

---

does not affirm life for its audience in the same way as tragedy did for the ancient Greeks, it ultimately does contain a life-affirming stance in the wake of Christian morality.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I continue my analysis of the relationship of life affirmation and art by looking closely at Nietzsche’s evolving thoughts on Hamlet. I begin with Nietzsche’s thoughts on Hamlet in The Birth of Tragedy. I focus on a passage that contains one of Nietzsche’s most extended meditations on Shakespeare. In this passage, Nietzsche uses Hamlet as an example of a Dionysian man. This passage is interesting because it does not seem to fit within the context of the surrounding discussion. Hamlet, an Elizabethan, English play, without a chorus appears during Nietzsche’s discussion of ancient Greek tragedy, its chorus, and its effect on its audience. More importantly, Nietzsche’s discussion of Hamlet in this passage is confusing because it equates Hamlet’s inaction, lethargy, and aversion to life with the Dionysian. This stands in stark contrast with his description of the Dionysian as “mystical,” “jubilant,” “exuberant,” and full of “delight” (BT 16, 17, 24) in other parts of The Birth of Tragedy. I present an interpretation of this passage that alleviates these concerns, illustrating how the Hamlet passage can illuminate Nietzsche’s early theory of life affirmation.

I continue by tracing Nietzsche’s changing views on Hamlet in his mature writings. In The Gay Science (1882) and Beyond Good and Evil (1886) Nietzsche is critical of Hamlet’s indolent and melancholy nature, focusing instead on the courage of Brutus and Caesar. However, in Ecce Homo (October/November 1888) and Nietzsche Contra Wagner (December 1888), Nietzsche’s estimation of Hamlet changes: he
becomes an example of a great, life affirming individual. Nietzsche’s changing views on 
*Hamlet* have implications for Nietzsche’s mature theory of human greatness and life 
affirmation, which, I argue, are often connected. If Hamlet’s candidacy as a great 
individual changes throughout Nietzsche’s writings, then it stands to reason that his 
theory of greatness and affirmation also undergo a shift.
CHAPTER ONE
THE WISDOM OF SILENUS: SUFFERING IN THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claims that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified” (BT 24, see also 5). For Nietzsche, art has the potential to make life appear meaningful and worth living—art can *justify* life.¹ Nietzsche looks to ancient Greek tragedy as an art form that was, historically speaking, particularly successful at making life appear worth living. It provided the ancients with “metaphysical solace [. . .] the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is mighty and pleasurable” (BT 7). For Nietzsche, the greatness of Greek tragedy lies in its ability to provide solace. Thus, for the ancient Greeks, tragedy is more than mere art for art’s sake: art is life affirming. What remains unclear, however, is why the Greeks, on Nietzsche’s understanding, needed this justification in the first place. Why, on Nietzsche’s view, does life need justification?

Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche discusses the “burden and heaviness of being” (BT 18) and identifies the “destructive havoc of so-called world history” and “the cruelty of nature” (BT 7). Most notably, Nietzsche recounts the story of the wisdom of Silenus. Upon being asked by King Midas “what is the most excellent thing for human beings,” Silenus responds, “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”

---

¹ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche uses the term “justification” in an unconventional and loose way. For the early Nietzsche, to justify life is to make it appear valuable or worthwhile. For a discussion of Nietzsche’s view on justification and theodicy, and how it changes over the course of his writings, see Christopher Janaway, “On the Very Idea of ‘Justifying Suffering,’” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 48.2 (2017): 152–70.
(BT 3). Silenus’ insight is, for Nietzsche, a popular piece of Greek wisdom, something that reveals that the “Greeks knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence” (BT 3). Understanding the wisdom of Silenus is important for interpreting The Birth of Tragedy because it can explain why, on Nietzsche account, life needs justifying at all.

In this first chapter, I examine what Nietzsche means when he recounts the wisdom of Silenus. I begin by providing an overview of the argument of The Birth of Tragedy and continue by analyzing the view that Silenus expresses a proto-Schopenhauerian truth about the world as “will.” I then review Bernard Reginster’s claim that the wisdom of Silenus is an early form of Nietzschean nihilism. As an alternative to these readings, I present my own interpretation of Silenus’ wisdom, arguing that it addresses a crucial, existential dimension of ancient Greek tragic culture. I conclude by identifying a place where nihilism does exist in The Birth of Tragedy. As I read Nietzsche, nihilism is found not in the wisdom of Silenus, but in the advent of Socratism.

I. The Birth of Tragedy: An Overview

On the surface, The Birth of Tragedy may appear to be a genre study about tragedy in general, but Nietzsche’s interest in tragedy serves a larger purpose: to examine the healthy, abundant, and life-affirming culture of ancient Greece. Nietzsche is interested in ancient Greek culture because he sees it as a unique highpoint in the history of civilization. Through their cultural myths and tragedies, the ancient Greeks developed

---

2 M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern argue that The Birth of Tragedy “is not in the end a genre study.” Instead, “Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory is closely associated with his cultural hopes.” See their Nietzsche on Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 280, 283.
a system of beliefs that allowed them not only to embrace the full extent of human suffering, but also to fully justify life in the face of it. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche juxtaposes the healthy, thriving ancient Greek society with his own, declining, German culture.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche outlines different phases in the development of ancient Greek society. He traces the rise of ancient Greek tragedy, which marked the apex of their life affirming culture. He also traces the death of tragedy, which, he argues, was accompanied by the rise in Socratic rationalism. On Nietzsche’s account, tragedy was born in ancient Greece, where it reached its peak and died, tragically, by suicide (see BT 11). The Socratic point of view first manifests itself in, and can be seen as developing out of, Euripides’ dramas. The great tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus are replaced with Euripides’ New Attic comedy in which, Nietzsche claims, “tragedy lived on in a degenerate form, as a monument to its own exceedingly laborious and violent demise” (BT 11). For Nietzsche, Socratism is characterized by an optimistic faith in knowledge: “it believes in correcting the world through knowledge, in life led by science; and it is truly capable of confining the individual within the smallest circle of solvable tasks, in the midst of which he cheerfully says to life: ‘I will you: you are worth understanding’” (BT 17). The problem with Socratism, according to Nietzsche, is that it attempts to completely avoid or correct the less pleasant aspects of our existence, what he calls “the terrible, icy stream of existence” (BT 18). The Socratic man “no longer wants anything in its entirety, complete with all the natural cruelty of things; this is how enfeebled and softened he has become by the optimistic way of looking at things” (BT 18). Compared
with ancient Greek culture, whose myths and tragedies allowed the Greeks to embrace suffering while also finding meaning for it, the Socratic man appears weak, unable to embrace and accept all aspects of this existence. Nietzsche argues that ancient Greek Socratism is the beginning of a period of decline, which extends to Nietzsche’s own German culture: “it now has to be said that Socrates’ influence has spread out across all posterity to this very day, and indeed into the whole future, like a shadow growing ever longer in the evening sun” (BT 15).

For Nietzsche, attic tragedy marks an apex in the development of ancient Greek civilization. At its best, tragedy allows an audience to celebrate life while, simultaneously, embracing the suffering and finitude of human existence. In tragedy, the audience learns to take delight in destruction: “he shivers in horror at the sufferings which will befall the hero, and yet they give him a premonition of a higher, far more overwhelming delight” (BT 22). The audience of a Greek tragedy receives an intimation of a “fantastic superabundance of life” (BT 3) that “life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable” (BT 7). The idea of a superabundance of life, which appears as an affirmation of life in the face of great suffering, is a concept that remains with Nietzsche throughout his career.³ On Nietzsche’s account, tragedy is capable of engendering this affirmative stance towards life though the interplay of two natural art drives, the Apolline and Dionysian. Nietzsche uses these two drives to understand an “enormous opposition” that existed in ancient Greece between “the Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor

³ Bernard Reginster provides a reading of Nietzsche that is orientated around his mature conception of life affirmation in The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysus” (BT 1). The Apolline is a drive towards image-making, which Nietzsche describes through the analogy of dreaming. We take pleasure in dreams, he argues, because, in dreams, everything resides at the surface of things, making them easy to understand. The lucidity of Apollonian dream states exists in stark contrast to “the only partially intelligible reality of the daylight world” (BT 1). Nietzsche describes the Dionysian drive through the analogy of intoxication (Rausch). Dionysian intoxication is associated with a loss of subjectivity and a complete self-forgetting that takes the form of oneness and unity with nature. As Nietzsche describes it, in a Dionysian state “each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him” (BT 1).

Nietzsche outlines the evolution of art in ancient Greece, which, he argues, is characterized by periods of conflict and reconciliation of the Apolline and Dionysian drives. These dueling drives “exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring” (BT 1). The ultimate result of this conflict is the advent of Ancient Greek tragedy in which the Apolline and Dionysian “appear paired and, in this pairing, finally engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure: Attic tragedy” (BT 1). In tragedy, the Dionysian drive, which is presented through the music of the tragic chorus, works in perfect harmony with the Apolline drive, which is presented through the figures on stage. The combination of these different art drives creates a unity that is more than the sum of its parts. The Apolline and Dionysian work together to create an experience capable of
justifying life in the face of “the fearful, destructive havoc of so-called world history” and “the cruelty of nature” (BT 7).

On Nietzsche’s account, the life-justifying capacity of tragedy is a result of a metaphysical insight into the ultimate ground of being: “Tragedy, with its metaphysical solace, points to the eternal life of that core of being despite the constant destruction of the phenomenal world” (BT 8). This metaphysical solace is a result of the “eternal phenomenon of Dionysiac art, which expresses the omnipotent Will behind the _princípiun individuationis_, as it were, life going on externally beyond all appearance and despite all destruction” (BT 16).

Nietzsche’s terminology is borrowed from one of his great influences, Schopenhauer. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche adopts the Schopenhauerian idea of the “will.” In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer distinguishes between the world of appearances and the “will.” The Schopenhauerian will is often seen as a version of the Kantian thing-in-itself. Our faculties of perception are incapable of perceiving the will. What we are capable of experiencing is called “representation” and it is a manifestation of the will. The will is characterized as an endless raging, striving, lawless, blind impulse and the world of appearances is this will concretized. The _princípiun individuationis_, or principle of individuation, is Schopenhauer’s term for the way that the objects of perception are individuated in space and time, and interact with one another causally. For Schopenhauer, the appearance of multiple objects of perception is ultimately illusory, since, in reality, the entire world is will and, as such, one and
The principium individuationis therefore belongs to Schopenhauer’s fundamental, metaphysical distinction between will, which is an endless, striving, undivided totality, and the realm of appearances, in which things appear to us as distinct objects. As Schopenhauer articulates it:

[T]he eyes of the uncultured individual are clouded, as the Indians say, by the veil of Maya. To him is revealed not the thing-in-itself, but only the phenomenon in time and space, in the principium individuationis, and in the remaining forms of the principle of sufficient reason. In this form of his limited knowledge he sees not the inner nature of things, which is one, but its phenomena as separated, detached, innumerable, very different, and indeed opposed.”

Nietzsche borrows Schopenhauer’s conception of the principium individuationis in his description of Dionysian intoxication: “whenever this breakdown of the principium individuationis occurs, we catch a glimpse of the essence of the Dionysiac” (BT 1). For Nietzsche, the Dionysian represents a breakdown of our typical comportment to the world of appearances. It marks a moment when the illusory veil of the realm of appearances is removed to reveal the ultimate ground of being or “mysterious primordial unity (das Ur-Eine)” (BT 1). The metaphysical solace that tragedy provides is a result of


5 Schopenhauer, World as Will and Representation, 352.

6 Compare with Schopenhauer’s account of what happens to the principium individuationis in tragedy: “It then reaches the point where the phenomenon, the veil of Maya, no longer deceives it. It sees through the form of the phenomenon, the principium individuationis; the egoism resting on this expires with it. The motives that were previously so powerful now lose their force, and instead of them, the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world, acting as a quieter of the will, produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself. Thus we see in tragedy the noblest men, after a long conflict and suffering, finally renounce forever all the pleasures of life and the aims till then pursued so keenly, or cheerfully and willingly give up life itself” (The World as Will and Representation, vol. 1, 253).
the individual’s momentary connection with the ground of being: “for brief moments we are truly the primordial being itself and we feel its unbounded greed and lust for being” (BT 17). Tragedy justifies life by providing a glimpse of the eternal ground of being, which remains unchanged, unlike our everyday world of appearances. On Nietzsche’s account, metaphysical solace is provided by the Dionysian elements of tragedy, the singing and dancing chorus.\(^7\) A full discussion of the Apolline and Dionysian drives and the way that they work together to engender metaphysical solace will be given in Chapter Two.

Nietzsche’s use of Schopenhauerian terms and formulas is uncontroversial. What is a matter of debate, however, is the extent to which Nietzsche adopts a Schopenhauerian metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Julian Young argues that there is “fairly wide agreement that *The Birth* incorporates without modification Schopenhauer’s metaphysics,” noting that the truly contentious issue “is whether he also endorsed Schopenhauer’s pessimism; whether, that is, he endorsed Schopenhauer’s inference from the pain and purposelessness of human existence to its worthlessness.”\(^8\) In spite of his statement to the contrary, Young’s claim about Nietzsche’s unadulterated incorporation of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy* is not universally accepted and

\(^7\) See BT 7: “The metaphysical solace which, I wish to suggest, we derive from every true tragedy, the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable, this solace appears with palpable clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings whose life goes on ineradicably behind and beyond all civilization, as it were, and who remain eternally the same despite all the changes of generations and in the history of nations.”

has many critics.\textsuperscript{9} Other critics abandon Young’s premise altogether and ask, already rejecting a Nietzschean commitment to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, whether or not the metaphysics of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} is internally consistent.\textsuperscript{10} Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes take the argument a step further, contending that Nietzsche “does not propound any speculative metaphysics as true.”\textsuperscript{11} I follow Gemes and Sykes’ reading on this matter, claiming that Nietzsche’s comments about the existence of a primordial unity should not be taken literally, but understood as Nietzsche’s description of the Ancient Greek’s belief in a myth about the existence of an ultimate ground of being. For my arguments on this matter, see Section Two of this chapter.

Another dimension of Schopenhauer’s influence on Nietzsche can be found in Nietzsche’s analysis of music. The original title of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} originally contained the subtitle “out the Spirit of Music.” Nietzsche borrows Schopenhauer’s assertion that music has the unique capacity to reveal the will that exists behind the world of appearances. For the Nietzsche of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, music is an essential, Dionysian aspect of tragedy, which is incorporated through the chorus. It can be


supposed that Nietzsche’s focus on music, which he largely abandons after *The Birth of Tragedy*, is at least partly a result of his interest in Schopenhauer’s philosophy and his personal relationship with Wagner. During the writing of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche was a frequent visitor at Wagner’s house in Tribschen and an intimate friend of the family. Both Wagner and Nietzsche were taken by Schopenhauer’s philosophy and utilized it in their writings. In both Wagner’s “Beethoven” essay and Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, which Nietzsche and Wagner were working on at the same time, Schopenhauer appears as an important influence. Further, Wagner himself plays an important role in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche’s story of the birth and death of tragedy is followed by his hopes for the rebirth of the spirit of tragedy in the musical dramas of Wagner. Wagner’s operas, much like ancient Greek tragedy, combine Apolline figures and characters with Dionysian music. However, Nietzsche’s hopes for Wagner do not last. In his 1886 preface to the second version of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claims to have long since changed his mind about Wagner. Nietzsche is now critical of his earlier interests in Wagner and Schopenhauer, coming to see Wagner as paradigmatic of the problems with modern culture. While Nietzsche eventually abandons some of the core ideas of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he takes up many of its primary themes throughout the remainder of his career, most particularly, as I argue in the chapters to come, his views on nihilism and life affirmation.
II. Schopenhauer and Silenus

In his 1886 retrospective preface “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” Nietzsche himself admits that *The Birth of Tragedy* is filled with “Schopenhauerian formulations” (BT “Attempt” 6). Thus, it is no surprise that commentators like Ivan Soll view the wisdom of Silenus as an expression of Schopenhauer’s pessimism and use this as evidence that Nietzsche does, in fact, endorse and take up significant aspects of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics.\(^{12}\)

On this reading, the wisdom of Silenus is equivalent to Schopenhauer’s metaphysical conception of reality as a constantly churning will, but expressed in the form of popular wisdom, not transcendental philosophy. As an expression of the ever-striving will, finite human life is filled with suffering. The fact that we humans are (nothing other than) manifestations of this blind striving means that we are in a constant state of desire.\(^{13}\) These desires can be fulfilled, but only temporarily. Thus, the only relief we get is momentary, partial, and fleeting. In Schopenhauer’s words: “so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace.”\(^{14}\) Since, for Schopenhauer, the only truth in the world

---


13 Schopenhauer explains this as follows: “Fulfillment [of our desires] brings this [suffering] to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfillment is short and meted out sparingly. But even the final satisfaction itself is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one” (Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, 196).

14 Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, 196.
is the will, we are left with a bleak picture of humanity: the world is filled with suffering, and this suffering is void of meaning.

On Soll’s view, Nietzsche’s reference to the wisdom of Silenus is evidence of his commitment to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. The idea that it is better not to have been born, or, since that is unachievable, to die soon, is viewed as signaling the Schopenhauerian conclusion that life is, in fact, permeated with meaningless suffering. According to Soll, “Silenus’ wisdom, that existence is basically suffering, is thus presented by Nietzsche as a metaphysical truth about the world as it is ‘in-itself’ (to use Kant’s formulation), that is, about the world as it really is as opposed to the way in which it superficially appears, inevitably distorted in being perceived.”

For Soll, Silenus’ wisdom therefore conveys a metaphysical truth about the nature of the will. It is easy to see how Nietzsche’s text lends itself to such a reading. Throughout The Birth of Tragedy, he refers to the term “will,” borrows from Schopenhauer’s philosophy of music, and quotes passages from The World as Will and Representation at length. Further, Nietzsche uses Schopenhauer’s concept of the “will” to describe the kind of forces he characterizes as “Dionysian.”

The production and enjoyment of art, for Nietzsche, is grounded in the two fundamental forces of the Dionysian and the Apolline. The Apolline represents the drive toward individuality, distinction, and order. The Dionysian, by contrast, represents the


12
loss of the individual and intoxication.\textsuperscript{16} Nietzsche first introduces Schopenhauerian concepts in his description of the Apolline, which he likens to the \textit{principium individuationis}. Nietzsche appeals to Schopenhauer’s principle of individuation to describe the Apolline as a realm of appearance, dream, and semblance. The Dionysian, in turn, appears when Apolline semblance breaks down: “whenever this breakdown of the \textit{principium individuationis} occurs, we catch a glimpse of the essence of the Dionysiac, which is best conveyed by the analogy of intoxication” (BT 1). Nietzsche uses the analogy of intoxication to describe the Dionysian because it captures the temporary transcendence of our usual forms of subjectivity. With the Dionysian we forget ourselves as individuals and become engrossed in “the innermost ground of man” (BT 1). Nietzsche speaks of this as the “primordial unity” or the “will.”

In his discussion of music, Nietzsche continues to link Schopenhauer’s notion of the “will” with the Dionysian. While sculpture and epic poetry (like that of Homer) are the purest forms of Apolline art,\textsuperscript{17} music is the purest form of Dionysian expression.\textsuperscript{18} In

\textsuperscript{16} Nietzsche describes the difference between the Dionysian and the Apolline as follows: “In order to gain a closer understanding of these two drives, let us think of them in the first place as separate art-worlds of \textit{dream} and \textit{intoxication}. Between these two physiological phenomena an opposition can be observed which corresponds to that between the Apolline and the Dionysiac” (BT 1).

\textsuperscript{17} Nietzsche identifies Homer as the paradigmatically naïve, Apolline artist: “Homer’s ‘naïveté’ can be understood only as the complete victory of Apolline illusion; it is an illusion of the kind so frequently employed by nature to achieve its aims” (BT 3).

\textsuperscript{18} Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as “the imageless art of music” (BT 1). Further, Nietzsche argues that the musical, Dionysian chorus is the origin of tragedy: “tragedy arose from the tragic chorus and was originally chorus and nothing but chorus […] . The fact that tragedy begins with the satyr, and that the Dionysiac wisdom of tragedy speaks out of him, is something which now surprises us just as much as the fact that tragedy originated in the chorus” (BT 7). Music, for Nietzsche, has the unique ability to reveal the Dionysian. As Nietzsche says: “it was the Herculean strength of music which, having attained its supreme manifestation in tragedy, is able to interpret myth in a new and most profoundly significant way” (BT 10).
his discussion of music and the Dionysian, Nietzsche draws heavily on Schopenhauer, quoting *The World as Will and Representation* at length (see BT 16). Borrowing Schopenhauer’s insight that music is “the language of the will,” Nietzsche argues that Dionysian music has the unique capacity to express “the omnipotent Will behind the *principium individuationis*, as it were, life going on eternally beyond all appearance and despite all destruction,” and to reveal “the primal mother, eternally creative beneath the surface of incessantly changing appearances, eternally forcing life into existence” (BT 16).

However, that Nietzsche uses Schopenhauerian terms while discussing the Dionysian does not, as Soll assumes, entail that he believes there exists a metaphysical truth about the world as it is in-itself. While Nietzsche may claim that Dionysian art provides us with “metaphysical solace [. . .] the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable” (BT 7)—this does not mean that Nietzsche ascribes actual existence to a metaphysical realm.19 Instead, metaphysical solace is described as a form of illusion:

> It is an eternal phenomenon: by means of an illusion spread over things, the greedy Will always finds some way of detaining its creatures in life and forcing them to carry on living. One person is held fast by the Socratic pleasure in understanding and by the delusion that he can thereby heal the eternal wound of existence; another is ensnared by art’s seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes; a third by the metaphysical solace that eternal life flows on indestructibly beneath the turmoil of appearances—to say nothing of the commoner and almost more powerful illusions which the Will constantly holds in readiness. Indeed, these three levels of illusion are only for those equipped with

---

19 Nietzsche specifically links Dionysian art to metaphysical solace in BT 17: “Dionysiac art, too, wants to convince us of the eternal lust and delight of existence; but we are to seek this delight, not in appearances but behind them. We are to recognize that everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction; we are forced to gaze into the terrors of individual existence—and yet we are not to freeze in horror: its metaphysical solace tears us momentarily out of the turmoil of changing figures.”
nobler natures, who generally feel the burden and heaviness of being with more profound aversion and who have to be tricked by exquisite stimulants into ignoring their aversion. Everything we call culture consists of such stimulants. (BT 18)

According to Nietzsche, humans have found many different ways to convince themselves to continue living, to persist in the face of inevitable suffering and meaninglessness. Some choose to believe in the idea that we can understand everything in the world through reason and the pursuit of scientific truth, or Socratism. Others prefer to indulge in pleasure and the beautiful Schein provided by the Apolline arts. The metaphysical solace associated with Dionysian art is just one in a long list of illusions to which people subscribe in order to make life bearable.

Nietzsche’s claim that metaphysical solace is a form of illusion indicates that his point is not to argue for the reality of the metaphysical depths of Dionysian art. His point, rather, is that a belief in the existence of a metaphysical realm is an effective way of detaining us in this life, of making us go on living. Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes make a similar point:

We hold that Nietzsche does not propound any speculative metaphysics as true. Nietzsche took Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* to render all such speculation pointless. The Greeks were not consoled on account of having special knowledge, but rather by dint of believing a first-order mythical narrative of the underlying unity of all things. This consoling narrative of the Greeks is nevertheless simply a myth (hence not knowledge). Nietzsche’s point is to bring out the way in which belief in myth consoles. He is interested, to borrow his phrase, in the “utility for life” of these beliefs, not their veracity.  

---

Indulging the myth of the existence of another metaphysical realm is one of many ways of making life appear worth living. If Nietzsche does not believe in the existence of “a metaphysical truth about the world as it is in-itself,” then it follows that the wisdom of Silenus cannot be a reflection of Nietzsche’s belief in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. Therefore, Soll draws a hasty conclusion when he states: “Silenus’ wisdom, that existence is basically suffering, is thus presented by Nietzsche as a metaphysical truth about the world as it is ‘in-itself.’”

21 Furthermore, why would Nietzsche argue that the metaphysical solace provided by the Dionysian is an illusion that convinces us to continue living, if it is supposed to be a reflection of the wisdom of Silenus? Nietzsche does not describe the Dionysian “will” as the source of suffering in the world, but rather as “the mystical, jubilant shout of Dionysos” (BT 16), which is imbued with “exuberant fertility” (BT 17) and “the eternal fullness of its delight” (BT 24). The Dionysian is characterized by an “immeasurable, primordial delight in existence [. . .] this delight is indestructible and eternal” (BT 17). It is an expression of an individual’s unity with nature, which Nietzsche puts as follows: “Now, hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbor, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of Maya had been torn apart, so that the mere shreds of it flutter before the mysterious primordial unity” (BT 1). On Nietzsche’s account, connecting with the Dionysian is not a painful but a “blissful” experience: “all of nature’s artistic power

reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity” (BT 1). When we uncover the Dionysian—which we do, according to Nietzsche, primarily through art—we do not join in with an aimless, striving, Schopenhauerian will that is the source of all our suffering in the world of appearances. Instead, the Dionysian has a more positive connotation. It “reveals to us the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of primal pleasure and delight” (BT 24). In a Dionysian experience, which Nietzsche depicts as the breakdown of our typical, subjective comportment to the world of appearances, we experience pleasure, delight, and ecstasy stemming from our feeling of communion with nature. And all of this is what makes the Dionysian a source of metaphysical solace—the Dionysian can convince us to keep on living because it is a belief in something filled with pain, but also joy and ecstasy.

Soll’s claim is therefore problematic on two counts. First, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche does not argue for the existence of a distinct metaphysical realm. Hence, it does not make sense to suggest that the wisdom of Silenus reflects this claim. Second, even if Nietzsche were, hypothetically, to argue that the Dionysian reflects the metaphysical core of existence, it would not follow from this that the wisdom of Silenus

22 On Nietzsche’s account, the Dionysian spirit was first felt through intoxication or the coming of spring: “These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink [ . . . ] or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life” (BT 1). The ancient Greeks first celebrated this impulse in their Dionysian festivals. It is at these festivals—filled with dance and song—that the Dionysian transforms into an artistic phenomenon: “Here for the first time the jubilation of nature achieves expression as art, here for the first time the tearing-apart of the principium individuationis becomes an artistic phenomenon” (BT 2). Eventually, the artistic phenomenon of Dionysian festivals was incorporated into ancient Greek tragedy, where it was harmonized with the spirit of the Apolline.
is necessarily an expression of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. For Nietzsche’s characterization of the Dionysian as something pleasant, exuberant, and blissful is at odds with the very core of Schopenhauer’s account of the will. The Dionysian should not be understand as merely a source of pain. Instead, it is a source of delight in existence and a vehicle for life affirmation.

III. Nietzsche and Nihilism

Another interpretation of the wisdom of Silenus draws on Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism. In his discussion of nihilism in the late Nietzsche, Bernard Reginster argues that “nihilism is a new term for an old idea, encapsulated starkly in ‘the terrible wisdom of Silenus’: the view that it is better not to be, the ‘will to nothingness.’”23 On my reading, however, it is not evident that nihilism is the problem that Nietzsche has in mind when he refers to the wisdom of Silenus.24

To begin, we need to address the interpretive difficulties of discussing Nietzsche’s notion of nihilism. While Nietzsche examines the problem of nihilism throughout his published writings, the largest concentration of his uses of this term can be found in his unpublished notebooks (1885–88), many of which would later be edited into The Will to

---

23 Reginster, The Affirmation of Life, 52.

24 Young also calls the wisdom of Silenus “nihilism” in The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 171: “The Greeks were profoundly aware of the horrendous ‘cruelty of nature’ and of the ‘terrible destructiveness of world history’ (BT 7), the passing away of even the finest individuals, nations and empires. They were also subject to the powerful temptation to be moved by the suffering and destructiveness of life to the nihilism uttered by the wise forest god, Silenus.”
Power under the direction of his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and Peter Gast. The variance in emphasis that is placed on Nietzsche’s published versus his unpublished writings will influence one’s understanding of Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism. Some scholars argue that we should give unqualified priority to the published works, citing the fact that his notebooks, in which he is trying out different ideas, are fragmentary and inconsistent, while his published works present a more careful and measured position. Others, including Reginster, place greater emphasis on Nietzsche’s notebooks. There are good reasons for paying close attention to Nietzsche’s notebooks: not only do the late notebooks, as already mentioned, contain the largest concentration of Nietzsche’s writings on nihilism, but also Nietzsche, in his published work, made explicit his intention to publish the content of his late notebooks. However, in the notebooks Nietzsche focuses on a particular kind of nihilism—I call this, with Nietzsche, “European nihilism”—which Nietzsche characterizes as a recent development that emerges after the death of Christianity. If we focus on nihilism only as it appears in the notebooks, then we miss the fact that Christianity is also nihilistic. Nietzsche explicitly and repeatedly makes

25 Reginster gives a number of interesting and compelling reasons to pay close attention to the notebooks in Affirmation of Life; see 16–20. For example, he argues: “Nietzsche left us abundant indications that he was hard at work on a project of revaluation of values, a project which, moreover, he considered to be of the utmost significance. Those of his works many now regard as his mature works (for instance, On the Genealogy of Morals), he himself presents as heralds to this comprehensive new project” (19). Further, Reginster notes the straightforward style of the unpublished notes, which mark a difference from the highly stylized writing in his published works. Reginster sees as a point in favor of using the notebooks, given that Nietzsche himself “indicates that his peculiar use of style [in Nietzsche’s published works] is a deliberate form of esoterism, an effort to conceal the truths he reveals from those not worthy of them (see BGE 30, 39, 43)” (19).

26 In On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche argues that he is preparing a discussion under the title “On the History of European Nihilism,” which will appear in a work titled The Will to Power, Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values (GM III:27). See also EH “Books: TI” 3.
this point in such works as *Ecce Homo*. Reginster’s account suffers from this very problem: he focuses too narrowly on the notebooks, and therefore overlooks Nietzsche’s claims about the nihilistic aspects of Christianity. Since it is outside the scope of this chapter to provide a comprehensive account of Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism, I limit my discussion to addressing why the wisdom of Silenus is not equivalent to nihilism on Reginster’s terms. That is, I proceed by demonstrating that the wisdom of Silenus cannot be reduced to European nihilism or the nihilism that Nietzsche primarily discusses in the notebooks from 1885 to 1888 (i.e. the texts Reginster focuses on).

My disagreement with Reginster is based, in part, on a fundamental difference in our understandings of Nietzsche’s notion of nihilism in the notebooks. Nietzsche describes European nihilism in different ways, at times depicting it as the result of logical premises: “nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals” (WP “Preface” 4). At other times, he describes it historically:

> What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This

---

27 For example, in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche writes: “Nothing in existence should be excluded, nothing is dispensable—the aspects of existence condemned by Christians and other nihilists rank infinitely higher in the order of values than anything the instinct of decadence is able to approve, to *call good*” (EH “Books: BT” 2). See also EH “Books” 1; TI “Skirmishes” 21; A 20, 59.

28 Reginster distinguishes between two different forms of nihilism: despair and disorientation. Nihilism of disorientation is the realization that our highest goals have no value (that there are no objective values), while nihilism of despair is the realization that our goals are unrealizable (that we live in a world that makes it impossible for us to achieve our highest goals). Neither of these forms of nihilism is compatible with the view that Christianity is nihilistic. Christianity posits our highest goals for us and convinces us that they are objective, real values, making nihilism as disorientation incompatible with Christianity. Nihilism as despair does not make sense as Christianity because Christians are not consciously in a state of despair; instead, they have a faith that they will be transported to heaven upon their death. For an extended discussion of why despair and disorientation are incompatible with Christianity as nihilism, see Andrew Huddleston, “Nietzsche on Nihilism: A Unifying Thread,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* (forthcoming) and Ken Gemes, “Nietzsche, Nihilism and the Paradox of Affirmation,” in *Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach an end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect. (WP “Preface” 20)

Reginster’s discussion of European nihilism focuses less on the historical dimension of Nietzsche’s argument. Instead, he describes it as “the ‘logical conclusion’ of an implicit reasoning.”29 Reginster, in other words, identifies a progression in the development of European nihilism, but views it as a fundamentally logical insight. For Reginster, nihilism is “the conclusion of an implicit reasoning that comprises two premises: the death of God, or the conviction that the highest values cannot be realized,” and “the negation of life, which is the stance motivated by the endorsement of life-negating values.”30 But this account of European nihilism makes it static and transhistorical, and thus overlooks the thoroughly historical nature of Nietzsche’s project.31

In his notebooks, Nietzsche describes nihilism as an emerging, in-between moment in European history—it “is only a transitional stage” (WP 7; see also WP 13).32

29 Reginster, Affirmation of Life, 39.

30 Reginster, Affirmation of Life, 49.

31 Reginster is not the first to do this. Other scholars provide similarly ahistorical definitions of nihilism. For example, Richard Schacht defines nihilism as “a natural consequence of the discovery of the untenability of certain traditional metaphysical and axiological views” (“Nietzsche and Nihilism,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 11 [1973]: 65–90, 89). Harold Langsam defines Nietzschean nihilism as “the claim that there are not legitimate values in the world” (“How to Combat Nihilism: Reflections on Nietzsche’s Critique of Morality,” History of Philosophy Quarterly 14 [1997]: 235–53, 235).

32 Randall Havas also emphasizes the transitional, and thus historical, nature of Nietzsche’s nihilism in Nietzsche’s Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), xiv–xv.
For Nietzsche, the present age is ripe for the reemergence of nihilism. This is because of the prevalence of what Nietzsche calls the “Christian-moral” interpretation of the world, in which European nihilism is rooted (WP 1). The Christian-moral interpretation, which Nietzsche sees as the dominant interpretation of the world and that from which individuals get their values, has run its course and is no longer capable of providing meaning to its followers. In Nietzsche’s words:

For why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these ‘values’ really had.—We require, sometime, new values.” (WP “Preface” 4)

Nietzsche sees European nihilism as emerging not from Christianity alone, but also from other types of religions or views of the world (e.g., Buddhism; see WP 1, 19). Thus, the Christian-moral viewpoint is characterized less by Christian orthodoxy than by a general repudiation of this world, which includes, but cannot be reduced to, Christianity. What Nietzsche is critical of, and sees as leading to nihilism, is the idea that we can find meaning only by reference to another world: “The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism” (WP 1). In Christianity, this is exemplified by the idea of heaven—life in this world is not as important as the afterlife, and all actions in this world are done to achieve what one wants in the world beyond (see GM I:15). While Christianity is Nietzsche’s primary target, he is equally critical of other religions and
philosophies—such as Buddhism and Judaism—which he sees as devaluing the worth of this world and life. For Nietzsche, it is, in other words, possible to be nihilistic even after abandoning theology. Once one no longer has faith in a God, one can still look for values in another sort of symptom—that of morality:

Having unlearned faith [. . .] one still follows the old habit and seeks another authority that can speak unconditionally and command goals and tasks. The authority of conscience now steps up front (the more emancipated one is from theology, the more imperativistic morality becomes). (WP 20)

For Nietzsche, Christianity and morality are problematic on the same grounds. In both cases, we encounter a worldview that looks for an absolute truth or authority in order to alleviate the burden of being responsible for its values.

European nihilism occurs when the Christian-moral viewpoint is no longer capable of providing absolute meaning. This happens when it reveals itself for what it is—it is destroyed “at the hands of its own morality” (WP 1). Nietzsche identifies its drive toward truth as the undoing of the Christian-moral worldview: “But among the forces cultivated by morality was truthfulness: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective” (WP 5). The desire for truth results in uncovering the fact:

[T]hat there is no truth, that there is no absolute nature of things nor a ‘thing-in-itself.’ This, too, is merely nihilism—even the most extreme nihilism. It places the value of things precisely in the lack of any reality corresponding to these values and in their being merely a symptom of strength on the part of the value-postiers, a simplification for the sake of life. (WP 13)
Along with a faith in Christianity came a faith in reason, which was developed and
nurtured. However, this developed capacity for reason ultimately reveals its own limits,
uncovering the fact that “we have measured the value of the world according to
categories that refer to a purely fictitious world” (WP 12). European nihilism, then, can
be understood as the moment when one realizes that pre-reflective values are not beyond
questioning. At this point we are left to ask, with Nietzsche, “The nihilistic question ‘for
what?’ which is rooted in the old habit of supposing that the goal must be put up, given,
demanded from outside—by some superhuman authority” (WP 20).

The wisdom of Silenus must also be understood historically. Just before his
introduction of the wisdom of Silenus, Nietzsche is describing the Apolline drive toward
beautiful illusion and asks, “What, then, was the enormous need that gave rise to such a
luminous company of Olympic beings?” (BT 3). For Nietzsche, the origin of the
Olympian gods, which he sees as the product of the same drive that gave birth to the
Apolline desire for semblance, is a response to a fundamental need that was shared by the
ancient Greeks. Nietzsche uses the story of Silenus to explain this need. The wisdom of
Silenus is a mythological interpretation of the plight of the ancient Greeks, who were
subject to “their extreme sensitivity, their stormy desires, their unique gift for suffering”
(BT 3). Nietzsche describes their awareness of suffering as follows:

That enormous distrust of the Titanic forces of nature, that moira which throned,
un pitying, above all knowledge, that vulture of man’s great friend, Prometheus,
that terrifying lot drawn by the wise Oedipus, that curse upon the family of Atreus
which compels Orestes to kill his mother, in short that whole philosophy of the

33 Nietzsche describes the relationship between the Apolline and the Olympian gods as follows: “The very
same drive which assumed sensuous form in Apollo gave birth to that entire Olympian world, and in this
sense we are entitled to regard Apollo as its father” (BT 3).
wood-god, together with its mythic examples, which destroyed the melancholy Etruscans—all this was constantly and repeatedly overcome by the Greeks, or at least veiled and withdrawn from view, by means of the artistic middle world of the Olympians. In order to be able to live, the Greeks were obliged, by the most profound compulsion, to create these Gods. (BT 3)

On Nietzsche’s account, the wisdom of Silenus is a reflection of the ancient Greeks’ awareness of the horrors of existence, which the Greeks felt acutely.34

Focusing on the historical nature of Nietzsche’s writing, in his description of both European nihilism and the wisdom of Silenus, makes it clear that his account of the ancient Greeks’ “enormous need” is fundamentally different from European nihilism. Nietzsche describes European nihilism as the result of a specific historical development—it emerges when the edifice of the Christian-moral viewpoint is no longer capable of providing its followers with meaning in the world. The wisdom of Silenus, by contrast, is a mythological interpretation of existence that cannot be isolated from ancient Greek tragic culture.

Nietzsche’s admiration for the ancient Greeks as a people who uphold life-affirming values is present throughout his corpus.35 In his veneration for the Greeks, Nietzsche situates ancient Greek culture in opposition to Christianity: “We believe in Olympus—and not in the ‘Crucified’ (WP 1034). Nietzsche sets up a fundamental

---

34 In his reflections on *The Birth of Tragedy* in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche reiterates the fact that the Olympic gods were merely a response to an enormous need in the ancient Greeks: “I saw the Greeks’ strongest instinct, the will to power, I saw them tremble in the face of the tremendous force of this drive,—I saw all their institutions grow out of the preventative measures they took to protect each other against their inner explosives [...] . The magnificent, supple physicality, the bold realism and immorality characteristic of the Hellenes was a necessity, not a ‘nature.’ It was only a consequence, it was not there from the beginning” (TI “Ancients” 3).

35 See, for example, GM I:10, II:23; TI “Ancients” 3, 4; GS P 4; and WP 1051.
contrast between a healthy, thriving, ancient Greek culture and mythology and a sickly, life-denying culture that is expressed through Christianity. While it may seem as if the wisdom of Silenus embodies a life-denying attitude, it is actually at the heart of what Nietzsche sees as the ancient Greeks’ affirmative stance. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the ancient Greeks’ life-affirming Apolline force as being intimately related to the fundamental wisdom espoused by Silenus: “The Olympian magic mountain now opens up, as it were, and shows us its roots. The Greeks knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to live at all they [the Greeks] had to place in front of these things the resplendent, dream-born figures of the Olympians” (BT 3). Nietzsche uses the example of Raphael’s *Transfiguration* as a metaphor for the interdependence of the Apolline and the pervasive Greek sentiment that finds mythical form in the wisdom of Silenus:

> In his *Transfiguration* the lower half of the picture, with the possessed boy, the despairing bearers, and the frightened, helpless disciples, shows us a reflection of the eternal, primal pain, the only ground of the world; here “semblance” is a reflection of the eternal contradiction, the father of all things. From this semblance there now rises, like some ambrosian perfume, a vision-like new world of semblance, of which those who are trapped in the first semblance see nothing—a luminous hovering in purest bliss and in wide-eyed contemplation, free of all pain. Here, in the highest symbolism of art, we see before us that Apolline world of beauty and the ground on which it rests, that terrible wisdom of Silenus, and we grasp, intuitively, the reciprocal necessity of these two things. (BT 4)

For Nietzsche, the terrible wisdom of Silenus lies at the very core of the ancient Greek tragic culture—one is not possible without the other. Thus, the wisdom of Silenus cannot be equivalent to nihilism because it is a mythologized sentiment that undergirds and is
central to the entirety of this life-affirming ancient Greek culture. European nihilism, in contrast, is characterized as a result of the collapse of the Christian-moral viewpoint—it is fundamentally opposed to the tragic worldview.

Furthermore, European nihilism is a condition that comes about after the death of God, after our belief in an extrahuman source of value—be it a god, truth, or a system of morality—has run its course and is no longer sufficient to provide existential meaning and sustenance. The wisdom of Silenus, on the other hand, is described as the underlying drive that caused the ancient Greeks to create gods in the first place. And these gods are fundamentally different from the gods of Christian morality. The Olympian gods do not place the meaning of life in another realm, but serve, for the Greeks, as a mirror that transfigures this world into one that is worth living in: “Thus gods justify the life of men by living it themselves—the only satisfactory theodicy! Under the bright sunshine of such gods existence is felt to be worth attaining, and the real pain of Homeric man refers to his departure” (BT 3). The gods created as a result of the wisdom of Silenus are nothing like the Gods that are dying in the advent of European nihilism—they are not of another world, but are beautiful reflections of human beings. European nihilism comes as our attempts to affirm life unravel, as our Christian morality collapses. In contrast, Silenus’ wisdom is an insight into the basic impulse that creates a need for life affirmation in the first place.

Reginster’s claim that the wisdom of Silenus is equivalent to European nihilism leaves us with more questions than answers. Reginster’s account strips both European nihilism and the wisdom of Silenus of the fullness of their histories. When viewed in this
way, ahistorically, it may appear that European nihilism is present even in the time of ancient Greece. And stripped of its historical character, the wisdom of Silenus can appear to be a form of wisdom equally available to all cultures and peoples. However, when we look at the historical discussion that Nietzsche applies to both cases, it becomes clear that European nihilism and the wisdom of Silenus cannot possibly be of a kind.

IV. Silenus and Truth

Thus far, I have argued that the wisdom of Silenus is not equivalent to nihilism or the Schopenhauerian will. At stake, rather, is an insight into the nature of suffering that was uniquely available to the ancient Greeks. But what, then, is the nature of this wisdom? When Nietzsche talks about the wisdom of Silenus, he often describes it as a form of truth. The question, though, is what Nietzsche has in mind when referring, in this context, to truth.

Nietzsche refers to truth throughout The Birth of Tragedy. Take, as an example, the following passage: “The Muses of the arts of ‘semblance’ grew pale and wan when faced with an art [Dionysian dance and song] which, in its intoxication, spoke the truth [Wahrheit]; the wisdom of Silenus called out ‘Woe, woe!’ to the serene Olympians” (BT 4). The use of the term “truth” here may seem to refer to the truth of the metaphysical, Dionysian underbelly of existence, which Nietzsche describes as the “innermost ground of man” (BT 1) and “the primal mother, eternally creative beneath the surface of incessantly changing appearances, eternally forcing life into existence” (BT 16), ultimately seeming to link this form of truth to the wisdom of Silenus. However, a closer
look at the context in which this passage appears reveals that Nietzsche is in fact talking about a different kind of truth. Here, Nietzsche is discussing the reaction of an Apolline Greek—a Greek who is completely wrapped up in Apolline semblance—to the emergence of Dionysian art. On Nietzsche’s account, the Apolline and Dionysian developed in stages.\textsuperscript{36} In the passage above, Nietzsche is describing the transition from an age dominated by Apolline illusion to an age dominated by Dionysian intoxication. The Dionysian reveals to the Apolline Greek a form of truth that had been hidden from the Greeks by their adoption of Apolline illusion, beauty, and semblance—the truth of why they needed the Apolline in the first place: “his [the Apolline Greek’s] entire existence, with all its beauty and moderation, rested on a hidden ground of suffering and knowledge which was exposed to his gaze once more by the Dionysiac” (BT 4). Nietzsche makes it clear that the reason the Apolline needed to be adopted in the first place was the Greeks’ keen awareness of the suffering in the world, which they transformed through their mythology into the wisdom of Silenus.

Ultimately, for Nietzsche, the wisdom of Silenus is a form of truth, but it is not a truth about the nature of the Dionysian. Instead, the wisdom of Silenus was the ancient Greeks’ way of understanding the suffering and pain that lie at the heart of existence. It is not just a truth about the nature of the world as we experience it, but it is also an interpretation of a fact of existence—the pain and suffering inherent in life—that is

\textsuperscript{36} See BT 4: “The Dionysian and the Apolline dominated the Hellenic world by a succession of ever-new births and by a process of reciprocal intensification; that, under the rule of the Apolline instinct for beauty, the Homeric world evolved from the ‘iron’ age with its Titanic struggles and its bitter popular philosophy; that this ‘naïve’ magnificence was in turn engulfed by the flood of the Dionysiac when it broke over that world; and that the Apolline, confronted with this new power, rose up again in the rigid majesty of Doric art and the Doric view of the world.”
inextricably linked to the ancient Greeks’ life-affirming worldview. The works of Aeschlyus, Sophocles, and Homer, which Nietzsche so greatly admires for providing the ancient Greeks with a form of artistic justification, would not be possible without this fundamental insight into the nature of suffering. Without this fundamental insight, the Greeks would not need to create the illusions that constitute their grand tragic culture.

V. Nihilism in *The Birth of Tragedy*

I would like to conclude by considering another one of Reginster’s claims about nihilism in *The Birth of Tragedy*. He argues that nihilism “lies at the heart of Nietzsche’s earliest book, *The Birth of Tragedy.*” On this point, I agree with Reginster: Nietzsche discusses nihilism in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but in a form different from the wisdom of Silenus.

In order to understand the role that nihilism plays in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is necessary to focus on one particular aspect of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity in modern culture: the faith in reason, logic, and science. For Nietzsche, nihilism can be caused just as much by faith in a God as by faith in reason: “The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world” (WP 23). Placing our faith in reason ultimately leads to the realization that reason is limited. For Nietzsche, Kant is an exemplar of someone who has reached a nihilistic standpoint through his faith in reason:

---

37 Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, 51.
“To divide the world into a ‘true’ half and an ‘illusory’ one, whether in the manner of Christianity or in the manner of Kant (and underhanded Christian, at the end of the day), is just a sign of decadence,—it is a symptom of a life in decline” (TI “Reason” 6). Kant is an example, on Nietzsche’s account, of how, through scientific, rational inquiry, we come to realize that reason can provide no transcendent, ultimate meaning—reason is the cause of its own undoing.

Nietzsche describes a similar phenomenon in The Birth of Tragedy, but calls it by a different name: Socratism. Socratism is the form of illusion that takes over after tragedy has died. The Apolline and Dionysian artistic forces recede into the background and this new, Socratic force takes over—it is characterized by “an esteem for knowledge” (BT 13) and an overdeveloped appreciation for logic. For Nietzsche, this faith in logic is a “profound delusion which first appeared in the person of Socrates, namely the imperturbable belief that thought, as it follows the thread of causality, reaches down into the deepest abysses of being” (BT 15). Socratism is a “sublime metaphysical illusion” that “belongs inseparably to science, and leads to its limits time after time” (BT 15).

38 Whether Nietzsche believes Socratism to be the cause of the death of tragedy, or if tragedy dies from within, as a result of an internal problem, is a matter of debate, which can be traced back to an exchange between Walter Kaufmann and Crane Brinton. Brinton, asserting that Nietzsche hated Socrates, argues that Socrates plays the role of a villain in The Birth of Tragedy. Kaufmann takes issue with this characterization of Nietzsche’s relationship with Socrates and argues instead that his thoughts on Socrates are much more complicated than Crane allows—paving the way for a number of scholars who recognize that Socrates does not always play the role of villain for Nietzsche. See Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), chap. 13, and Crane Brinton, Nietzsche (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941). More recently, Alexander Nehamas has claimed that Nietzsche “bitterly” attacked Socrates in The Birth of Tragedy, arguing that Socrates is the “murderer of tragedy” (The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 131).
Nietzsche’s description of the downfall of Socratism in *The Birth of Tragedy* is analogous to his description of European nihilism in his later writings:

> At present, however, science, spurred on by its powerful delusion, is hurrying unstoppably to its limits, where the optimism hidden in the essence of logic will founder and break up. For there is an infinite number of points on the periphery of the circle of science, and while we have no way of foreseeing how the circle could ever be completed, a noble and gifted man inevitably encounters, before the mid-point of his existence, boundary points on the periphery like this, where he stares into that which cannot be illuminated. (BT 15)

In this moment “logic curls up around itself at these limits and finally bites its own tail” (BT 15). When science becomes clear about its own limitations and realizes that it ultimately cannot account for each and every (let alone the innermost) dimensions of human existence, it finds itself constitutively unable to understand the world through reason alone. At this moment Socratism loses its power to provide meaning.³⁹

While Nietzsche may begin *The Birth of Tragedy* with a discussion of the wisdom of Silenus, of the inherent pain and suffering of the world, he is ultimately hopeful. The ancient Greeks used this fundamental pain to create a great form of art: tragedy, which allowed them to justify life, to find it worth living, worth celebrating. And in Nietzsche’s discussion of nihilism in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he is hopeful that the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy can rise again. He is, in this early period, hopeful that we can trade Socratism for a new, richer, more robust, more life-affirming illusion.

³⁹ In Nietzsche’s reflections on *The Birth of Tragedy* in *Ecce Homo*, he describes Socratism as “deeply nihilistic” (EH “Books: BT” 1).
For Nietzsche, ancient Greek society is remarkable, in part, because its culture, mythology, and art were able to successfully respond to a fundamental need, understood, as I argued in the previous chapter, through the wisdom of Silenus. At the apex of Greek society, tragedy becomes, on Nietzsche’s account, the highest, most life-affirming form of art. Nietzsche’s turn to tragedy to address this need, however, raises further questions that relate to a classic problem in aesthetics: the paradox of tragedy. The paradox of tragedy asks how it is possible to take pleasure in tragedy. If the tragic emotions (traditionally pity and fear) are painful, how do we derive pleasure from tragic drama? If people generally avoid pain, then why do they want to experience art that generates pain?

With its origins in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the paradox of tragedy has been taken up by ancient and modern thinkers.\(^1\) Nietzsche can be seen as both responding to and undermining traditional responses to this question.\(^2\) This is because, for Nietzsche, the

---


2 Nietzsche, for example, is critical of Aristotle’s response to the paradox of tragedy. He argues that Aristotle’s account of catharsis through pity and fear, like many other accounts of the effect of tragedy, has little to do with pure aesthetics, instead focusing on moral or medical phenomena: “Since the time of Aristotle, no one has yet given an explanation of the effect of tragedy which would permit the conclusion that artistic states were involved, or that the audience was engaged in aesthetic activity. One voice tells us that pity and fear are to be driven by these grave events to the point of discharge and hence relief, another that we are to feel elevated and inspired by the victory of good and noble principles when we see the hero being sacrificed in the name of a moral view of the world while I fully believe that precisely this and only
traditional question of how we can derive pleasure from tragedy misses the mark. On Nietzsche’s view, we do not appreciate tragedy because it provides us with pleasure, but because it allows us to justify life. Nietzsche’s refrain throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified” (BT 24, see also 5), is an expression of his belief that tragedy allowed the people of ancient Greece to find meaning in the face of suffering, which, as I argued in Chapter One, the ancient Greeks understood through the mythological formulation of the wisdom of Silenus. This is an accomplishment that goes beyond mere pleasure.

In this chapter, I analyze Nietzsche’s account of life affirmation in ancient Greece. I begin, in Section One, by looking closely at the two art drives that, according to Nietzsche, comprise tragedy: the Apolline and Dionysian. I look at the way each of these drives justify life on their own, before they are combined in tragedy, and challenge a standard reading of how life justification functions in each one. The Apolline is generally thought to justify life through concealing some important truth about the world, while the Dionysian is thought to do the opposite, to justify life by revealing an important truth about the world. I argue that this standard reading has it backwards—the Apolline does not operate merely by covering over unpleasant aspects of existence in order to make them more tolerable, but by providing a new perspective on the world that allows an

this is the effect which tragedy has on very many people, the clear conclusion to be drawn from this fact is that all of them, along with the aestheticians who interpret things for them, have never heard that tragedy is a supreme art” (BT 22). See also BT 24: “In order to explain tragic myth, the very first requirement is to seek the kind of delight that is peculiar to it in the purely aesthetic sphere, without reaching across into the territory of pity, fear, or the morally sublime.”

34
individual to see the suffering inherent in life as desirable or beautiful. The Dionysian, conversely, justifies through a complete evasion of the pain that is integral to finite human existence. In Section Two, I examine what happens to the function of the Apolline and Dionysian art drives when they are combined in tragedy, ultimately arguing that tragedy enables the spectator to become the type of person who can affirm his own life. In doing so, I examine three different types of interpretations of how tragedy justifies life. These different interpretations are separated by the metaphysical commitments they take Nietzsche to hold. On my reading, the way one interprets Nietzsche’s metaphysical commitments in *The Birth of Tragedy* has important implications for how one understands affirmation through tragedy.

I. Apolline and Dionysian Affirmation

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explicitly argues that tragedy provides a *justification* of life. This is an early version of what, in his later writings, is referred to as life affirmation. There is some discussion about affirmation in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which asks whether or not Nietzsche is talking about a true affirmation of life. Some, like Simon May, want to make a distinction between affirmation as justification, which is structured as a form of theodicy, and an affirmation, which appears in Nietzsche’s later writings, that is an “ungrounded Yes-saying to our life as a whole just as we find it.”

---

agree with May that there do appear to be different types of affirmation in Nietzsche’s early and late works. However, as will become clear in Chapter Three, I do not take Nietzsche to value one of these types of affirmation over the other. For the purposes of this chapter, when I use the term ‘life affirmation,’ I take it to include justification as affirmation.

While, in The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche primarily focuses on tragedy as the art form that is most effective at justifying life, he also discusses life affirmation through different artistic means. These other forms of art develop out of the Apolline and Dionysian, which are, first and foremost, “artistic drives of nature” (BT 2). The Apolline and Dionysian art drives correspond to different forms of art: the Apolline is the art of the Homeric epic, “image-maker or sculptor” and the Dionysian is the “the imageless art of music” (BT 1). These two very different drives “exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent in the opposition between them” (BT 1). The ultimate result of this conflict between the Apolline and the Dionysian is tragedy, in which the two opposing drives come together to form a harmonious union.

While Nietzsche’s discussion of tragedy as the product of the union of the Apolline and Dionysian takes center stage in his first book, his analysis of these two art drives, and their respective abilities to provide affirmation, are important for understanding his overall project. Nietzsche does not believe that the Greeks found only one way of affirming life through tragedy. Instead, he values the Greeks because they found many different ways to affirm life through art. In this section, I discuss life
affirmation as it functions in Apolline and Dionysian art and challenge a common reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*, which holds that the Apolline affirms by veiling or obscuring a fundamental truth about the suffering inherent in the world, while the Dionysian affirms by revealing this truth. I intend to demonstrate the opposite. That is, I intend to demonstrate that the common reading is mistaken because the Apolline allows greater access to the truth of the suffering in this world than the Dionysian.

Before I begin, I would like to clarify what I mean when I refer to the ‘truth’ that Apolline and Dionysian may or may not give us access to. I do not take this to be a metaphysical truth about the eternal ground of being. Instead, I take it to be a truth about the nature of the suffering inherent in finite human life. I provide an extended discussion of Nietzsche’s metaphysical commitments in Section Two of this chapter. Some readings of *The Birth of Tragedy* take the Dionysian metaphysical core of the world to be the ‘truth’ that is revealed to us in tragedy. On this reading, when the Apolline and Dionysian work together in tragedy, the Apolline shields us from the full force of the Dionysian metaphysical truth, while allowing us to glimpse the Dionysian underbelly of existence without leading to despair and life denial. I am not a proponent of this reading because the metaphysical conception of the Dionysian is not, as I argue in Chapter One, what Nietzsche thinks ancient Greek art protects us from. For Nietzsche, ancient Greek art, be it in the form of tragedy, Apollonian epic, or Dionysian music, is a phenomena that “by means of an illusion spread over things…always finds some way of detaining its creatures in life and forcing them to carry on living” (BT 18). Nietzsche’s purpose in discussing ancient Greek art is, at least in part, to demonstrate how it functioned as a
justification to life—not to show that it is the very reason why we need to affirm life in the first place.

Christopher Janaway offers a reading that articulates a standard difference in the way that the Apolline and Dionysian affirm life.⁴ According to Janaway, Apollonian art, “protected its adherents from nausea at the truth because it prevented them from properly coming to know it.”⁵ The ancient Greeks “veiled or concealed the truth with illusion” creating a “screen between themselves and reality.”⁶ For Janaway, in Apolline art “Existence had no value and could not be affirmed in reality, but in a substitute dream-reality, made sufficiently radiant and engaging, it could.”⁷ The Dionysian, on the other hand, affirms life by providing “what Nietzsche now calls a ‘metaphysical consolation’, namely ‘that whatever superficial changes may occur, life is at bottom indestructibly powerful and joyful’ (BT 7).”⁸ The Dionysian elements of tragedy “enable one to live with the truth by confronting it in an affirmative frame of mind, not to live in spite of the

⁴ I take Janaway’s reading to be paradigmatic of common readings of Apolline and Dionysian affirmation in The Birth of Tragedy. See his “Beauty is False, Truth Ugly: Nietzsche on Art and Life,” in Nietzsche on Art and Life, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Bernard Reginster’s reading contains a similar account in his “Art and Affirmation,” in Nietzsche on Art and Life, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Reginster argues that Apolline art affirms through “avoidance or evasion, a deliberate ignorance of the true character of existence, or a disengagement from it,” while tragic art “rests on an insight into the terrible character of our existence” (20). He argues further: “In a purely Apollonian culture, that is to say, in a culture in which Apollonian arts have not been combined with Dionysian arts, the affirmation of existence is made possible by draping a ‘veil of beautiful appearances’ over its true character” (17).

⁵ Janaway, “Beauty is False, Truth Ugly,” 45.

⁶ Janaway, “Beauty is False, Truth Ugly,” 43.

⁷ Janaway, “Beauty is False, Truth Ugly,” 43.

truth by veiling it over.”

In the case of Apolline affirmation “horrific thoughts are blocked out and something beautiful put in their place.”

In Dionysian affirmation, by contrast, “the thoughts remain in consciousness but are encountered differently and put to a different use.”

Looking at Nietzsche’s paradigmatic example of Apollonian art, Homeric poetry, provides us with reasons to suspect this standard reading of Apolline and Dionysian affirmation in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The content of Homeric poetry is itself a direct depiction of violence, death, and betrayal—the very things Janaway claims are being veiled in Apolline art. They are not beautiful stories that shy away from portraying human suffering, but are explicit descriptions of the arbitrary and senseless miseries that human beings often endure. Yet, Nietzsche claims that these myths are themselves life

---


10 Janaway, “Beauty is False, Truth Ugly,” 45.


12 Silk and Stern also note the violence characteristic of Homeric epic, citing it as a potential problem for Nietzsche’s claims about the primacy of tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Can lyric poetry produce the tragic effect? Or merely the tragic attitude (das Tragische)? How far can the effect on an audience be said to follow from the representation of the attitude? Can even the epic serve as vehicle? The Iliad is a case in point. The sacrifice of Patroclus to Hector and then Hector to Achilles in a sense anticipates the rhythms of fifth-century tragedy; and certainly from its menacing divine ground the poem derives a full measure of ‘incurable sufferings.’” On Silk and Stern’s reading, this is problematic because Nietzsche asserts “the identity of the medium and the message.” If tragic elements can exist in Homeric epic, then Nietzsche’s assertions about the medium of tragedy are jeopardized. See, M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 279. On my reading, Nietzsche’s interest in tragedy has less to do with it as a genre of dramatic form and more to do with the cultural conditions of ancient Greece that allowed it to flourish. For the early Nietzsche, the importance of tragedy is contingent on the fact that it was a part of a particularly healthy and life affirming culture.

13 James Porter discusses the association of violence and Homer in the classicist tradition that Nietzsche was responding to. Porter argues that the Homeric epic is a direct precursor for tragedy: “It has, for instance, always recognized (for the most part reluctantly, when it was not being disavowed), that Homer opens a window onto a whole world of violence and vengeance and onto what Nietzsche calls the ‘abysses [die Abgründe] of hatred.’ (Achilles’ maltreatment of the corpse of Hector is just one instance; the Illadic
affirming, and in an extremely effective way, providing the “only satisfactory theodicy” (BT 3). If the paradigmatic example of Apolline art directly depicts human suffering, how can Janaway claim that Apolline art affirms by covering over or avoiding this very feature of existence?

As an alternative, I suggest that, on Nietzsche’s account, instead of providing affirmation by veiling or concealing the truth of the nature of the world, the Apolline affirms by transfiguring the perspective we take on the world that we live in: “The same drive which calls art into being to complete and perfect existence and thus to seduce us into continuing to live, also gave rise to the world of the Olympians in which the Hellenic ‘Will’ held up a transfiguring [verklärenden] mirror to itself” (BT 3). But how does this transfiguration happen? One answer can be extrapolated from Nietzsche’s description of the Apolline as remaining at the level of surface and image (see BT 9). We can make sense of this suggestion by looking closely at the paradigmatic Apollonian art form: the Homeric epic. Homer’s poetry is presented in the third-person. The emphasis is not on the inner lives of the characters, but on their deeds and actions. These ancient Greek myths do not focus on the inner thoughts, pains, anxieties, or emotions of the characters.

---


14 Julian Young makes a similar point: “Talk of ‘illusion’, ‘delusion’ and ‘lie’ as a way of dealing with the terrible suggests, at first glance, sentimentalisation, censoring out the bad bits in life… But, as Nietzsche well knows, Homer’s stories are not at all like that, for they are war stories, full of blood, guts and death. So that cannot be Nietzsche’s meaning. What, rather, he is doing, I think, is repeating Schelling’s observation that the epic form is an ‘objective’, third-person form, that though the characters, of course, have inner lives, we are not drawn into those inner lives as we are with lyric form.” In The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 174-5.
Instead, we are given an account of their actions, of what they do in the world.\textsuperscript{15} As Nietzsche argues:

Whereas the latter [the epic poet] is joyfully contented living in these [Apolline] images and in them alone, and never tires of contemplating lovingly even the minutest details of them, and whereas even the image of the wrathful Achilles is for him merely an image whose wrathful expression he enjoys with the dream-pleasure in semblance (so that he is protected by this mirror of semblance against merging and becoming one with his figures), the images of the lyric poet, by contrast, are nothing but the poet himself, merely various objectifications of him, as it were, which is why he can say ‘I’ as the moving centre of that world. (BT 5)

Unlike in lyric poetry, which gives the reader an account of the inner thoughts of the speaker, epic poetry remains at the surface. We do not get an account of Odysseus’ loneliness and homesickness when Calypso traps him on Ogygia for seven years. Nor do we enter into the grief that Odysseus would have felt after the death of all of his shipmates on the way to Calypso’s shores. While we do learn that Odysseus was unhappy about being there—”Seven endless years I remained there, always drenching with my tears the immortal clothes Calypso gave me”\textsuperscript{16}—we learn this through his actions, his constant tears, not through an inner monologue or description of emotion.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, the

\textsuperscript{15} Jean Paul Vernant emphasizes this focus on the actions, over the subjective experience, of ancient Greek heroes: “The myths are never told from the point of view of the protagonist in such a way as to indicate the problems which are presented from the agent’s point of view: the hero does not plan, make preparations, or look ahead; he does not have to organize the temporal sequence of his actions. When his exploits follow one after the other it cannot even be claimed that they are in a linked sequence or set in any defined order.” See his \textit{Myth and Thought among the Greeks} (London: Routledge, 1983), 332. He also notes that “Homeric man had no real unity and no psychological depth” (Introduction, xii).


\textsuperscript{17} Irene J. F. De Jong notes that Homeric narrative relies heavily on direct speech: “To be a Homeric hero means to be a ‘doer of deeds and speaker of words’ (\textit{Il}. 9.443), and in order to allow his characters to display their full heroic worth the narrator often gives them the floor.” While much of Homeric epic relies on this sort of straightforward narration, De Jong points out the existence of a personal perspective or
entire seven-year ordeal takes up a mere half page of the epic. Instead, we learn of the exciting adventures that ensue after Odysseus leaves the island, of his adventures with the Cyclops and Circe and his travels to the underworld. This allows us to view the sufferings of Odysseus in a way that does not invoke too much pain. Homeric poetry is capable of depicting the struggles of war without asking its audience to experience (or empathize with) the accompanying suffering.

Further, the great heroes of Homer’s epics—Odysseus, Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, Priam—are examples of how enduring suffering can lead to greatness. If these noble and heroic characters can endure great hardships, then we should strive to also. And these characters, on a didactic reading, anyway, do not simply endure these hardships, but also demonstrate why hardships are necessary—none of Homer’s characters would be great without the challenges that they had to overcome.

18 Embedded focalization that exists in an early form in Homer: “While Historians of narrative claim that it was only with the advent of the modernists, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, that this type of perspective made its entrance in European literature. In a rudimentary form, however, the device is observable in Homer, when for one or more lines he tells us what a character sees, feels, or thinks. In the Odyssey this technique is put to great effect, when we, but not the other characters, are repeatedly given to understand what Odysseus, incognito in his own palace, is inwardly thinking, his disguise forbidding him to speak out.” Irene J. F. De Jong, “Narrative,” in The Homer Encyclopedia, ed. Margalit Finkelberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010).

19 Nietzsche began his career as a philologist, writing specifically on Homer in his 1869 essay “Homer and Classical Philology” and his never-published essay from 1872 called “Homer’s Contest.” James Porter notes that Nietzsche used Homer as an entry point into a larger debate about the constitution of the philological discipline: “From early on Homer was Nietzsche’s way of getting at the constitutional troubles of the classical discipline, which in turn stood at the end of a long history in the transmission and recovery of classical antiquity in the West. Homer was always the quintessential philological object, but also the most conflicted of classical ideals. In his inaugural lecture, Nietzsche asked (in Vico’s wake) whether
Homeric art transforms tales of blood and guts, longing and loneliness into beautiful stores that provide their audience with pleasure. Part of the reason for this pleasure, according to Nietzsche, is that the Apolline mimics our dream states, which are “the deep ground common to all our lives” in which we experience “the state of dreaming with profound pleasure and joyous necessity” (BT 1). This pleasure comes from the “complete intelligibility” of dreams: “we take pleasure in dreaming, understanding its figures without mediation; all forms speak to us; nothing is indifferent or unnecessary” (BT 1). In Apolline art, as in dreams, we are able to experience a sense of perfection not available to us in our everyday lives, in the “partially intelligible reality of the daylight world” (BT 1). This intelligibility means that dreams must always include “measured limitation,” “freedom from wider impulses,” and “the wise calm of the image-making god” (BT 1). In Apollonian art, one trusts in images and takes pleasure in the complete transparency they provide.

The pleasure that we get from dreams does not diminish when the content of the dream is frightening or unpleasant—”he also sees passing before him things which are

---

Homer was a person who became a concept or a concept that became a person. He knew the question was in fact insoluble, and he meant it to stand as an aporia: for the idea of Homer can never be thought except through the fiction of a person. Operating within and yet challenging the modern Wolfian tradition of Homeric scholarship, the lecture demonstrated both the insufficiency and the ineluctability not only of Homer’s fictional identity, but also of the unity of each of the two Homeric epics, and finally of the discipline of classics itself.” See James Porter, “Nietzsche and Homer,” in The Homer Encyclopedia, ed. Margalit Finkelberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010). For a detailed account of Nietzsche’s philological thinking, see Porter’s Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Nietzsche describes the difference between the Apolline dream state and our everyday consciousness as follows: “The higher truth, the perfection of these dream-states in contrast to the only partially intelligible reality of the daylight world, together with the profound consciousness of the helping and healing powers of nature in sleep and dream, is simultaneously the symbolic analogue of the ability to prophesy and indeed of all the arts through which life is made possible and worth living” (BT 1).
grave, gloomy, sad, dark, sudden blocks, teasings of chance, anxious expectations” (BT 1). These dreams, with less than pleasant content, are nonetheless still a source of pleasure because the dreamer is always able to escape the suffering, because he never forgets “that fleeting sense of its [the dream’s] character as semblance” (BT 1). Homer’s epics allow us to look on the world of the ancient Greeks through the lens of a dream. The actions of the Homeric characters are pleasant because they eschew the depths of experience. Everything remains at the surface.

The affirmation provided by Apolline art is not limited to a mere veiling or covering over, but is a form of affirmation that changes the perspective with which we look at the world. This new perspective allows us to encounter the painful elements of this world without experiencing too much pain as a result. While Nietzsche does describe Apolline art as a form of veiling, it is not a veiling that obscures our view of reality. Instead, Apolline art veils by transforming the perspective that we take on the events that we see.

On my reading, Nietzsche’s description of the Apolline is much closer to Janaway’s account of Dionysian affirmation. For Janaway, the Dionysian elements of tragedy “enable one to live with the truth by confronting it in an affirmative frame of mind….the thoughts remain in consciousness but are encountered differently and put to different use.”[21] This is similar to what Nietzsche says occurs in Apolline affirmation: the

perspective that we take on others’ experiences allows us to have an intimation of their suffering without a full dose of the accompanying pain.

Conversely, I argue, on Nietzsche’s account, Dionysian art affirms by a covering over or evasion of reality, which is what Janaway describes as occurring in Apolline affirmation. While Janaway argues that in Apolline art “horrific thoughts are blocked out and something beautiful put in their place,”22 this is actually how Dionysian art provides life affirmation—through a complete forgetting or turning away from our everyday world. Janaway argues that the Dionysian affirms through taking on a new perspective on life: “The Dionysian effect of tragedy is its alleged ability to dissolve the sense of individuality and merge the participant or spectator into a ‘primal oneness’ or ‘primal being…From the consciousness that characterizes this wider standpoint it is possible to rejoice in the destructiveness of life towards the individual.”23 While he is correct when he describes Dionysian affirmation as functioning by allowing the individual to look at the world through a broader, less individualized standpoint or perspective, his account fails to acknowledge that the result of this new perspective is a complete covering over or obfuscation of reality as we know it.

At first blush, the Dionysian may appear to reveal more than it obscures. But what it seems to reveal is a distinct metaphysical realm of the primordial unity, which the Greeks gained access to through festivals of dance and song:

These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken

---


either under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life. (BT 1)

In the Dionysian festival, the individual forgets himself, loses his sense of individuality, and becomes one with others and with nature: “Now, hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn apart, so that mere shreds of it flutter before the mysterious primordial unity (das Ur-Eine)” (BT 1). Through the festival of song and dance “man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the brink of flying and dancing, up and away into the air above” (BT 1). Dionysian art shows us that “we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose procreative lust we have become one” (BT 17).

The result of Dionysian art is a state of ecstasy and intoxication caused by the breaking apart of our typical way of relating to the world. All of our usual worries, inhibitions, and concerns fall away as our individuality temporarily vanishes, and we connect with what Nietzsche calls the “primordial unity.” The primordial unity represents a state in which we no longer hold onto our limited, individualized perspective on the world. This new Dionysian perspective forces us to “recognize that everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction” (BT 17). In spite of this realization, we do not “freeze in horror” (BT 17). This is because the perspective of the primordial unity shows us how to take joy in both creation and destruction. Nietzsche
compares the Dionysian primordial unity to “a playing child who sets down stones here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again” (BT 24). This child is able to perceive “the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of primal pleasure and delight” (BT 24).

Instead of focusing on the inevitable destruction, death, and pain of life, the perspective of the primordial unity convinces us that this pain is just one part of a greater whole that encompasses creation and destruction, joy and suffering.

Nietzsche’s metaphysical commitments are relevant here. If Nietzsche is to be taken as adopting a robust Schopenhauerian metaphysics, in which he believes in the reality of the primordial unity, then the Dionysian would not be seen as a form of forgetting. Instead, the Dionysian perspective would provide the individual with a deep form of knowledge about the true metaphysical core of the world. However, if Nietzsche is taken to be rejecting the metaphysical reality of the primordial unity, then the Dionysian perspective does not reveal anything true about the nature of our world. On my reading, Nietzsche’s references to the primordial unity do not evidence his adoption of a substantive metaphysics. Nietzsche does not believe in the existence of a distinct metaphysical realm of the primordial unity; instead he views it as a consoling myth. The belief in this myth is what was consoling for the ancient Greeks, not the actual

---

24 For my arguments against Nietzsche’s adoption of a substantive Schopenhauerian metaphysics, see Chapter One.

25 On this point, I follow Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, “Nietzsche’s Illusion,” in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 88. As I argue in Chapter One, Nietzsche identifies the metaphysical solace provided by tragedy as a form of illusion (see BT 18). Thus, it does not make sense to hold that Nietzsche maintains a robust metaphysical view.
existence of the primordial unity. Therefore, if what the Dioynsian presents to us is no
more than a myth, then it does not reveal anything about the true nature of existence to
us. Instead, it affirms life by allowing us to inhabit a mythical perspective that deludes us
about the nature of this world. When we are in the midst of Dionysian revelry, we
completely forget the sufferings of our daily lives. The world that we actually live in is
not a joyous unity, but one fraught with the cruelty of nature and the arbitrary suffering of
human history.

While it is true that Dionysian art provides life affirmation by generating a new
perspective or standpoint, this new standpoint is one that completely obscures from view
our daily reality. A key element of the Dionysian’s affirming power is that it creates a
state of forgetting. The affirmation provided by the Dionysian is a form of escapism. It is
only by escaping from our daily reality and taking on a mindset of joyful ecstasy in the
unity of nature that we are able to experience the Dionysian joy that affirms life. When
we inhabit the Dionysian perspective, we momentarily forget what it is like to experience
the world as an individual: “the individual, with all his limits and measure, became
submerged here in the self-oblivion of the Dionysiac condition and forgot the statues of
Apollo” (BT 4).

Janaway’s reading of the way that Apolline and Dionysian art provide life
affirmation misses key aspects of each element. While it is sometimes thought that the
Apolline obscures while the Dionysian reveals, their modes of life affirmation are
actually the opposite. While the Apolline may appear to be a veiling or covering over, it
is actually a way of looking at the world with a different perspective that allows us to
accept the suffering that often accompanies existence. The Dionysian, on the other hand, is a means of evasion or forgetting of our everyday world that is accomplished by imagining another world entirely.

II. Life Justification through Tragedy

The Apolline and Dionysian do not exist in isolation. Instead, Nietzsche argues that they reach their greatest artistic heights when combined in tragedy. In their unity, the Dionysian and Apolline are each altered, undergoing a transformation in the way they provide life affirmation: “Dionysos speaks the language of Apollo, but finally it is Apollo who speaks that of Dionysos. At which point the supreme goal of tragedy, and indeed of all art, is attained” (BT 21). In order to understand how tragedy can affirm life, we need to understand how the Apolline and Dionysian are altered by their union and how they work together.

At first blush, the relationship between the Apolline and the Dionysian appears to be fairly simple. The Dionysian element of tragedy depicts the cruelty, suffering, and horror that is inherent in existence, while the Apolline veils these aspects with the beauty of the play’s artistry—its speeches, sets and costumes. This reading is motivated by Nietzsche’s insistence that Apolline beauty is responsible for covering over Dionysian aspects of tragedy: “Apolline consciousness only hid this Dionysiac world from them like a veil” (BT 2).26 It is also motivated by Nietzsche’s repeated description of the Apolline

26 See also BT 21: “Thereby Apolline deception is revealed for what it is: a persistent veiling, for the duration of the tragedy, of the true Dionysiac effect.”
as “art’s seductive veil of beauty” (BT 18). Here, the Apolline is necessary because the Dionysian elements of tragedy are too much for us to bear, allowing us to view these Dionysian elements without falling into despair. The Apolline and Dionysian, with their accompanying beauty and suffering, coexist in tragedy. It is this coexistence that gives tragedy its affirming quality. Tragedy forces us to realize the extent to which suffering and pain are at the heart of human existence, while also redeeming this suffering by cloaking it in the beauty of Apolline appearances. In this way, the suffering of life is presented to us as capable of being endured, as something with which we can live.

However, this interpretation makes it seem like tragedy can only function through a covering over of the painful elements depicted in tragedy, which, in turn, makes Nietzsche’s account of life affirmation sound too similar to the Humean solution to the paradox of tragedy. The paradox of tragedy asks how it is possible to take pleasure in an artwork that features the pain and suffering of others. Hume’s solution to this problem is to argue that the pleasant feelings we have when watching a tragedy come from the overall eloquence of the play.27 When we view a tragedy, the pain we feel from watching Oedipus’ life fall apart is “converted” into pleasure by the more dominant feeling of pleasure we get from the play’s artistry. This is analogous to the idea that the beautiful

27 At the beginning of his essay “Of Tragedy,” Hume notes that “It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy” (Hume, “Of Tragedy,” 29). Hume’s concerns over the paradox of tragedy are likely fueled by two different worries. First, the paradox can be seen as a motivational problem. What would drive audiences to seek out artworks that evoke negative emotions? How can we take pleasure in the pain of others? Second, the paradox of tragedy can be seen as a moral problem. Do tragedies invite us to take pleasure in the suffering of others? Is it ethically problematic for us to take pleasure in the suffering of tragic characters?
The artistry of the Apolline elements in tragedy are responsible for the belief that life is worth living—the Apolline compensates for the pain and suffering depicted in the tragedy. The Humean approach might be satisfactory in accounting for how one can take pleasure in a tragedy, but it is not satisfactory for understanding how tragedy can help us to affirm life. While it is possible to see how the pleasant aspects of a tragedy—the beautiful speeches, sets, and costumes—can generate enough pleasure to outweigh the pain incited by the horrible acts depicted on stage, it is harder to see how this can convince us that life is worth living. If tragedy is supposed to justify our lives in the very face of inevitable suffering, it must do more than temporarily create, for the duration of the tragedy, an experience where pleasure outweighs pain. Instead, it must demonstrate to us, somehow, that our lives, in total, are worth living.

This interpretation also overlooks a crucial element of Nietzsche’s account of life affirmation through tragedy—that the affirmation also comes from its Dionysian elements. Nietzsche argues that the Dionysian “dithyramb’s chorus of satyrs is the saving act of Greek art” (BT 7). The chorus does this by providing the audience with “metaphysical solace…that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable” (BT 7). Nietzsche does not argue that Apolline beauty is solely responsible for making life appear worth living, but that the Dionysian chorus, instead of presenting to us the horrors and sufferings of life, actually

---

28 Though Hume’s solution to the paradox of tragedy is generally agreed to be problematic because he does not give a satisfying or complete account of the process of “conversion” from unpleasant to pleasant emotions. While Hume’s solution to the paradox is not accepted as convincing today, much of the contemporary literature on the paradox of tragedy can be seen as a reaction against Hume’s solution.
provides us with a much-needed metaphysical solace that convinces us that, at its core, life is pleasurable. For Nietzsche, the truly consoling aspects of tragedy, the aspects that convince us that life is worth living, comes from a breakdown of our typical, subjective comportment to the world of appearances, which allows us to connect with the primordial unity (das Ur-Eine). It is through the connection with these Dionysian aspects of tragedy that we receive a justification of life.

Nietzsche’s insistence that the tragic justification of life comes from its Dionysian elements—its metaphysical solace—has been interpreted in a number of different ways. These different interpretations rely on varied accounts of Nietzsche’s metaphysics in The Birth of Tragedy. The way that one construes Nietzsche’s metaphysical commitments has implications for the way that the Apolline and Dionysian come together to justify life through tragedy. In the literature, there are three primary ways that Nietzsche’s metaphysical commitments have been understood. First, commentators like Young and Soll have argued that Nietzsche maintains a Schopenhauerian metaphysics throughout The Birth of Tragedy. On this reading, the metaphysical solace that one receives through tragedy is a result of one’s communion with Nietzsche’s equivalent of the Schopenhauerian will. Second, others like Silk and Stern and Aaron Ridley argue that Nietzsche retains a robust metaphysical theory that has been adapted from, but ultimately

---

differs from, Schopenhauer’s theory of the will. On this theory, Nietzsche is taken to hold a belief in the existence of a primordial unity that one can come in contact with through Dionysian art. The metaphysical solace of tragedy comes as a result of communion with this primordial unity. Third, scholars like Gemes and Sykes argue that Nietzsche does not maintain the existence of a Dionysian primordial unity. Instead, they argue that Nietzsche’s comments about the metaphysical solace that tragedy provides can be understood as a result of the ancient Greeks’ belief in the existence of a primordial unity. I will say more about each of these in turn.

The view held by Julian Young and Ivan Soll that The Birth of Tragedy maintains a thoroughly Schopenhauerian metaphysics, while once influential, has met with many objections throughout the literature. Béatrice Han-Pile, for example, provides an extended discussion of the matter, arguing against Young’s assertion that Nietzsche adopts both Schopenhauer’s metaphysics and his pessimism. Han-Pile contends that many difficulties and contradictions arise if one asserts a Schopenhauerian basis for The Birth of Tragedy: “For example, if the primal affect of the world is purely pain, as in the World as Will and Representation, how can the Dionysian, which mimics it, be both painful and pleasurable?” The argument I present in Chapter One is a version of Han-

---

30 See Aaron Ridley, Nietzsche on Art (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Silk and Stern, Nietzsche on Tragedy.

31 See Gemes and Sykes, “Nietzsche’s Illusion,” 88.


33 Han-Pile, “Nietzsche’s Metaphysics in The Birth of Tragedy,” 373. Han-Pile further argues: “If individuation is, as in Schopenhauerian thought, an illusion due to the principle of sufficient reason, how
Pile’s argument. If tragedy is to provide metaphysical solace by giving us access to the primordial unity, it makes little sense to assume that this primordial unity is equivalent to Schopenhauer’s will, which Nietzsche argues is the source of all our suffering in the world of appearances.\(^{34}\) Instead, the Dionysian has a more positive connotation: it is an “immeasurable, primordial delight in existence [...] this delight is indestructible and eternal” (BT 17). For Nietzsche, the Dionysian contains “the mystical, jubilant shout of Dionysos” (BT 16), which is imbued with “exuberant fertility” (BT 17) and “the eternal fullness of its delight” (BT 24). It is unclear how a Schopenhauerian notion of the will, which is characterized by suffering and striving, fits into Nietzsche’s picture of metaphysical solace, which, he argues, comes from our communion with the primordial unity—through the joyous and jubilant Dionysian elements of tragedy. A Schopenhauerian metaphysics cannot explain how communing with a striving and suffering noumenal realm is supposed to justify life.\(^{35}\)

The second type of view, as described by Silk and Stern and Ridley, rejects a Schopenhauerian metaphysics, but attributes to Nietzsche a belief in the existence of a distinct metaphysical realm of the primordial unity. For Silk and Stern, Nietzsche’s

---

\(^{34}\) For Schopenhauer, to will is to suffer. This is because “all willing springs from lack, from deficiency.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 196.

\(^{35}\) Ridley makes a similar point: “If Dionysus stands for the will in Schopenhauer’s sense, then in Nietzsche, touching base with Dionysus is not the crowning confirmation of pessimism, as it is in Schopenhauer, but rather its revitalizing antidote” (Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art*, 20).
“aesthetics is thoroughly metaphysical itself.”\textsuperscript{36} On their reading tragedy is capable of justifying life because it:

\[\text{Presents us with the destruction of individuals in a way which is exalting, because it gives us a glimpse of the underlying deeper power of life (‘we believe in eternal life’, exclaims tragedy’, §16), in which we have a share, but which is only glimpsed when individuality is transcended. The glimpse of the eternal is what Nietzsche elsewhere calls ‘metaphysical consolation…from another world’ (§ 17).}\textsuperscript{37}

On this view, tragedy consoles by providing us with a form of insight into the Dionysian metaphysical realm. Ridley shares a version of this view: “life must touch base with an energy that is blind to such thoughts, that is oblivious to the final futility of human living and that glorifies, simply (and, as it might be, irrationally), in itself. This is the energy of Dionysus.”\textsuperscript{38} According to Ridley, when we view a tragedy, the metaphysical solace we receive is provided by an insight into a distinct, Dionysian metaphysical realm that allows us to forget about the sufferings of our day to day existence. Life affirmation comes from the realization that there is a distinct, consoling, metaphysical realm that exists alongside our day to day reality, which is fraught with inevitable pain and suffering. The Apolline, on this reading, is responsible for preventing us from taking in too much of this Dionysian insight, which would be too much for us to bear. Ridley, for example, argues: “The effect of the drama upon the spectator is, essentially, to allow him a glimpse of the (alleged) truth that lies at the heart of it—that human individuality is an illusion—while

\textsuperscript{36} Silk and Stern, \textit{Nietzsche on Tragedy}, 288.

\textsuperscript{37} Silk and Stern, \textit{Nietzsche on Tragedy}, 267.

\textsuperscript{38} Ridley, \textit{Nietzsche on Art}, 15.
also shielding him from the full impact that, without the filtering and mirroring, this truth would have upon him.”

While this reading solves the problem of Young and Soll’s Schopenhauerian interpretation, removing the Schopenhauerian requirement of a noumenal realm characterized my suffering and striving, it brings with it some new complications. One of these complications arises when we take a close look at Nietzsche’s description of the effect of tragedy on a member of the ancient Greek audience. For Nietzsche, affirmation through tragedy happens in a number of progressive phases. The first thing the spectator experiences in tragedy is a feeling of union with the musical, Dionysian chorus, which, in turn, provides him with a feeling of Dionysian joy: “This is the first effect of Dionysiac tragedy: state and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature” (BT 7).

However, this first effect of tragedy is not what is ultimately responsible for providing life affirmation in tragedy. Instead, this first feeling of euphoria at the Dionysian state is immediately followed by a feeling of lethargy and revulsion:

The reason for this is that the ecstasy of the Dionysiac state, in which the usual barriers and limits of existence are destroyed, contains, for as long as it lasts, a lethargic element in which all personal experiences from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience. But as soon as daily reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such with a sense of revulsion; the fruit of those states is an ascetic, will-negating mood. (BT 7)

---

The striking contrast between the Dionysian state and our daily reality is what causes this feeling of lethargy. The experience of the Dionysian chorus, which induces a joyous state of intoxication and unity, puts into relief that fact that our world is arbitrary, cruel, and filled with suffering. Instead of providing us with a life affirming experience, as Ridley and Silk and Stern’s readings would suggest, this experience of the Dionysian only serves to increase our sensitivity and awareness of the suffering inherent in human life. As Nietzsche says:

Now no solace has any effect, there is a longing for a world beyond death, beyond the gods themselves; existence is denied, along with its treacherous reflection in the gods or in some immortal Beyond. Once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now he understands the symbolism of Ophelia’s fate, now he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion. (BT 7)

Oddly enough, Nietzsche claims that the Dionysian chorus, which is responsible for inciting this feeling of lethargy in the spectator, is also responsible for alleviating it. As Nietzsche puts it: “The dithyramb’s chorus of satyrs is the saving act of Greek art; the attacks of revulsion described above spent themselves in contemplation of the intermediate world of these Dionysiac companions” (BT 7).

Ridley and Silk and Stern’s accounts of metaphysical consolation through an encounter with the Dionysian primordial unity thus run into several issues. First, it is clear on Nietzsche’s reading that an experience of the Dionysian does not lead, primarily, to an experience of life affirmation. Instead, the experience of the Dionysian, while at
first intoxicating, joyful, and euphoric, ultimately leads to an experience of lethargy and life aversion when one leaves the Dionysian state and re-encounters their everyday comportment towards reality. By Nietzsche’s own lights, the true aesthetic justification of tragedy only happens when the lethargic, life-averse individual re-encounters the Dionysian chorus of satyrs: “Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, art approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live” (BT 7). On Silk and Stern’s account, metaphysical consolation is supposed to function by means of an artistically mediated encounter with the Dionysian. However, as Nietzsche’s description of the first effect of tragedy makes clear, this leads to a heightened awareness of suffering in existence. This view cannot make sense of Nietzsche’s claim that the Dionysian is, paradoxically, both the cause and the remedy of life aversion in the experience of tragedy.

A second problem for this account arises when we look at Nietzsche’s conception of truth and illusion in The Birth of Tragedy. Nietzsche claims that tragedy reveals truth. However, he is ambivalent about the nature of the truth that tragedy reveals. Throughout the text, he claims that the truth that tragedy reveals is the Dionysian primordial unity, an eternal and unchanging realm that is the true nature of the world. Nietzsche describes “that which truly (Wahrhaft) exists” as “the eternally suffering and contradictory, primordial unity” (BT 4). The Dionysian chorus “proclaims the truth (Wahrheit) from the heart of the world” (BT 8). Nietzsche reiterates this same point: “In Dionysiac art and its tragic symbolism this self-same nature speaks to us in its true (wahren), undisguised
voice: “Be as I am! - the primal mother, eternally creative beneath the surface of incessantly changing appearances” (BT 16). Nietzsche insists throughout the text that the point of tragedy is to allow its audience to experience truth: “the Dionysian Greek wants truth (Wahrheit) and nature at full strength” (BT 8). Nietzsche’s use of “truth” to denote the Dionysian primordial unity fits well with Ridley and Silk and Stern’s argument that Nietzsche maintains a metaphysical commitment in The Birth of Tragedy. If the primordial unity is something that actually exists, and tragedy is something that allows a glimpse of the primordial unity, then it follows that tragedy can be said to reveal something “true” about the nature the world. However, Nietzsche’s other comments about truth and illusion complicate this story. While Nietzsche often describes the Dionysian as “true,” he also refers to it as an illusion:

It is an eternal phenomenon: by means of an illusion spread over things, the greedy Will always finds some way of detaining its creatures in life and forcing them to carry on living. One person is held fast by the Socratic pleasure in understanding and by the delusion that he can thereby heal the eternal wound of existence; another is ensnared by art’s seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes; a third by the metaphysical solace that eternal life flows on indestructibly beneath the turmoil of appearances. (BT 18)

Nietzsche categorizes Dionysian metaphorical solace as just one of many different types of illusions, including Apolline beauty and Socratic rationalism. If we follow Silk and Stern and Ridley in claiming that Nietzsche maintains a metaphysics of the primordial unity, then we are unable to explain how the Dionysian can be at once true and an illusion.
A third, and final, problem with assuming that Nietzsche upholds a metaphysics of the primordial unity is that it is not clear, on this reading, whether or not a genuine form of life affirmation through tragedy is actually possible. According to Silk and Stern and Ridley’s accounts, the spectator receives affirmation by getting an insight into the Dionysian perspective, by identifying with the artistic and creative powers of Dionysus, who Nietzsche depicts as an artist-god, a primordial unity. Tragedy allows the spectator to momentarily inhabit the perspective of the primordial unity, which, full of joy as it is, makes him believe that life is worth living. But this story does not fully explain the way that the spectator himself achieves this justification. Inhabiting the perspective of another entity who is experiencing joy is different from being the entity that is experiencing the joy. In short, this account cannot explain how we, as spectators, can justify life simply through participating in the joy of a supra-human metaphysical entity.\(^{40}\)

I would like to suggest a third alternative: Nietzsche does not maintain the existence of the metaphysical, Dionysian, primordial unity. Following Gemes and Sykes, I argue that the metaphysical solace experienced by the Greeks was not generated by identification with an actual Dionysian metaphysical entity, but rather by the ancient Greeks’ belief in such an entity. This reading solves the three problems with Silk and Stern and Ridley’s accounts that I listed above.

\(^{40}\) Interestingly enough, in Young’s 2013 *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, he makes a similar objection, having revised his view in the decade after the publication of his *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art*. Young states: “As a Greek, one receives comfort by inhabiting someone else’s view of life, and only the mistake of thinking it is one’s own life that has been comforted persuades one not to ‘negate the will.’” Young asserts that the problem with Nietzsche’s account of aesthetic justification is that “one cannot justify the *human* condition by pointing to the joys of a *supra-human* existence.” Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, 185.
In my view, the first effect of tragedy—which Nietzsche describes as “the overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature” (BT 7)—should not be understood as an actual merger, on the part of the tragic spectator, with the primordial unity. Instead, this feeling of unity is a result of the ancient Greek spectator believing, on the basis of the religious mythology of Dionysus, that he has merged with the primordial unity. The Dionysian joy, which Nietzsche calls the first effect of tragedy, comes from the experience of communing with the tragic chorus. It might be difficult to understand how the chorus of a tragedy could provide such a feeling of joy to the audience of a tragedy without the benefit of an actual metaphysical insight. However, part of this difficulty comes from the fact that, as modern individuals, we have a hard time inhabiting the mindset of an ancient Greek individual. Nietzsche notes throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* that it is difficult for modern audiences to understand how tragedy would have been experienced by the ancient Greeks. This is because we are not ancient Greeks—we cannot understand what it would be like to believe in the ancient Greek gods, to believe in the myths of the Dionysian cult, in the existence of a primordial unity. It is because ancient Greek culture was steeped in myth—because the ancient Greek spectator believed in the underlying unity of all things—that the tragic chorus was able to evoke a feeling of Dionysian unity in its audience. When the ancient Greek spectator viewed the tragic chorus, he did not see a number of actors on stage. Instead, he saw,

[T]he original image (Urbild) of mankind, the expression of man’s highest and strongest stirrings, an enthusiastic celebrant, ecstatic at the closeness of his god, a sympathetic companion in whom the sufferings of the god are repeated, a proclaimer of wisdom from the deepest heart of nature, an emblem of the sexual omnipotence of nature which the Greek habitually regards with reverent astonishment.” (BT 8). Unlike the modern spectator,
who, Nietzsche argues, “always had to remain conscious of the fact that what he saw before him was a work of art and not empirical reality,” the ancient Greek spectator “is required to see in the figures on stage real, physically present, living beings. The chorus of the Oceanides really believes that it sees before it the Titan Prometheus, and takes itself to be as real as the god on the stage. (BT 7)

The tragic chorus uses dance and song to achieve this effect: “The essence of nature is bent on expressing itself; a new world of symbols is required, firstly the symbolism of the entire body, not just of the mouth, the face, the word, but the full gesture of dance with its rhythmical movement of every limb” (BT 2).

The ancient Greek spectator is vastly different from the modern spectator, who always remains aware that what he is watching is a performance. The architecture of the ancient Greek theater makes it possible for the distinction between spectator and spectacle to fade away: “A public of spectators as we know it was something unknown to the Greeks; in their theaters it was possible, given the terraced construction of the theater in concentric arcs, for everyone quite literally to overlook (übersehen) the entire cultural world around him, and to imagine, as he looked with sated gaze, that he was a member of the chorus” (BT 8). In tragedy, a breakdown occurs between chorus and spectator. As Nietzsche describes:

[T]he chorus of satyrs…is great enough to render the spectator’s gaze insensitive and unresponsive to the impression of ‘reality’ and to the cultured people occupying the seats around him. The form of the Greek theatre is reminiscent of a lonely mountain valley; the architecture of the stage seems like a radiant cloud formation seen from on high by the Bacchae as they roam excitedly through the mountains, like the magnificent frame in which the image of Dionysos is revealed to them. (BT 42)
The ancient Greek audience was more than a group of spectators. Instead, they were an active participant in the tragedy. Only by fully believing and living the ancient Greek mythology is one capable of fully understanding how the ancient Greeks experienced tragedy.\(^4\)

The ancient Greek spectator’s belief in the existence of the primordial unity is what enables the first stage of tragedy, which is characterized by a joyous feeling of union. This feeling of unity, in turn, incites a change of perspective in the spectator. We can understand the first stage of tragedy, where the spectator experiences a union with a mythical primordial unity, as a transformation to the perspective of an artist. In the throes of lethargy and revulsion, the ancient Greek spectator is able to begin the process of consoling himself through identification with the Dionysian chorus, which imbues the spectator with an “artistic gift”: “Dionysiac excitement is able to transmit to an entire mass of people this artistic gift of seeing themselves surrounded by just such a crowd of spirits with which they know themselves to be inwardly at one” (BT 8). The “artistic gift” that the chorus transmits to the spectator is similar to that of the “genuine poet,” who, in

---

\(^4\) An important subtext of Nietzsche’s distinction between the ancient and modern spectator has to do with contemporary German opera. In Nietzsche’s Germany, a spectator could not fully understand the functioning of the Greek chorus because the best approximation they had was opera. As Simon Goldhill articulates: “The history of the performance of Greek tragedy is wholly intertwined with the history of opera. From Montverdi to Wagner, opera has seen itself as the reinvention of Greek tragedy, and the modern performance of tragedy repeatedly draws on opera for its performance tradition.” Simon Goldhill, “The Greek Chorus: Our German Eyes,” in *Choruses, Ancient and Modern*, eds. Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann, and Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 37. The chorus, in fact, became a problem for both the conceptualization and staging of the chorus. Goldhill continues: “As productions of Greek tragedy come to be stated with more regularity, the chorus becomes the most vexing difficulty for directors and audiences alike, a difficulty not just of the conceptualization of the collective onstage but its very form of performance and voice: singing and music, or chant, or speech? Collective singing and speaking, or individual voices? How can the intimacy and personal violence of the exchanges of tragedy be played out in front of an apparently inactive group of spectators, constantly onstage?” (41).
the process of artistic creation, expresses herself metaphorically. But she does not use metaphor as a mere linguistic convention; instead, she uses metaphor as a way of seeing something real before her eyes. Nietzsche argues: “for the genuine poet metaphor is no rhetorical figure, but an image which takes the place of something else, something he can really see before him as a substitute for a concept” (BT 8). For Nietzsche, “This process is the original phenomenon of drama—this experience of seeing oneself transformed before one’s eyes and acting as if one had really entered another body, another character” (BT 8). This phenomenon does not happen only with the artist in the process of creating the tragedy, but instead, “this phenomenon occurs as an epidemic: an entire crowd feels itself magically transformed like this” (BT 8).

As I noted above, however, this is only the first phase of the tragic experience. The joy that is felt through communion with the Dionysian chorus—the “overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature” (BT 7)—is only temporary and is immediately followed by feelings of revulsion and lethargy. This lethargy and aversion to action is a result of an insight into what Nietzsche calls a “terrible truth”: “No, it is not reflection, it is true knowledge [die wahre Erkenntnis], insight into the terrible truth [Wahrheit], which outweighs every motive for action” (BT 7). The “terrible truth” Nietzsche is describing here is not the unity that one feels when one experiences the Dionysian, but is a realization that, compared to the joy of the Dionysian state, our everyday reality is nothing but the “fearful, destructive havoc of so-called world history” and “the cruelty of nature” (BT 7). A Dionysian experience puts into relief the fact that the world is arbitrary and cruel, rife with suffering.
This reading complicates the problem of Nietzsche’s conflicting statements regarding the truth of the Dionysian primordial unity. On the one hand, it does offer a type of a solution. If the primordial unity does not exist, then it makes sense to call it an illusion. On the other hand, it intensifies the problem. It now becomes clear that there is more than one type of “truth” that comes from tragedy. Sometimes Nietzsche suggests that the “truth” revealed in tragedy is equivalent to an insight into the primordial unity. Other times, Nietzsche argues that the truth revealed in tragedy is a fact about the arbitrary and cruel nature of our everyday, finite existence.

The fact that Nietzsche presents two different notions of truth in *The Birth of Tragedy* can be seen as an insoluble problem or confusion. Maudemarie Clark, for instance, argues that Nietzsche is ultimately conflicted between wanting to accept Schopenhauer’s pessimistic view of life and wanting to reject Schopenhauer’s conclusion that the only redemption in this life is through negation of the will. For Clark, there is a fundamental tension between Nietzsche’s Schopenhauerian commitments and his interest in life affirmation. She argues that this tension can only be understood as an uncertainty or mistake on Nietzsche’s part.\(^\text{42}\) My interpretation, on the other hand, suggests a different way of interpreting Nietzsche’s contradictory statements about truth.

Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is skeptical about the possibility of true

\(^{42}\) Maudemarie Clark, “Deconstructing *The Birth of Tragedy*,” in *Nietzsche on Ethics and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 211-12. Clark argues: “The problem is that Nietzsche regards as the truth not simply Schopenhauer’s metaphysical doctrine of the world as will, but, more importantly, the conclusion Schopenhauer drew from it, that life is not worth living….I propose that in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is accepting this “truth,” but is attempting to avoid the conclusion Schopenhauer drew from it: that the ascetic life is the highest life, that only negation of the will brings redemption” (211).
knowledge. This is evidenced in his criticisms of the Socratic search for truth, which, interestingly, he also notes is a form of illusion:

a profound *delusion* which first appeared in the person of Socrates, namely the imperturbable belief that thought, as it follows the thread of causality, reaches down into the deepest abysses of being, and that it is capable, not simply of understanding existence, but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion is an instinct which belongs inseparably to science, and leads it to its limits time after time, at which point it must transform itself into *art; which is actually, given this mechanism, what it has been aiming at all along.* (BT 15)

Nietzsche’s criticisms about our faith in the search for an absolute form of scientific truth should give us pause when considering his theory of truth in *The Birth of Tragedy.* I want to suggest that Nietzsche’s general skepticism about the possibility of true knowledge is a good reason to consider the possibility of a looser notion of the term. If truth is not an absolute entity, then it is possible to have different types of truth. On this picture, the primordial unity is “true” because it was believed to be true by the ancient Greek audience. It is also “true” for Nietzsche because the Dionysian represents, for him, the life-justifying ability to find meaning in suffering, which he sees as the ultimate, we could say the “truest,” purpose of art. Conversely, the arbitrary and cruel nature of finite human life, which Nietzsche argues is also revealed in tragedy, is also “true” for Nietzsche. This is a particular fact of existence that tragedy is particularly adept at portraying. It is my suggestion that, for Nietzsche, holding that tragedy is “true” in both of these ways is not a contradiction, but a result of his skeptical attitude towards truth. It

---

43 Han-Pile makes a similar suggestion, arguing that the early Nietzsche maintains a “radical skepticism about the possibility of true knowledge.” Han-Pile, “Nietzsche’s Metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy,*” 394.
is still possible to see this as a confusion or problem for Nietzsche’s account. But, I think it is a problem that the early Nietzsche would be able to live with.

What is left to be examined, however, is how, on this reading, one can escape from the lethargy and life aversion that comes as a result of one’s initial communion with the Dionysian chorus. In Nietzsche’s discussion of the phases of the tragic experience, he argues that what saves the ancient Greek spectator from seeing “only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks” is the “dithyramb’s chorus of satyrs,” which he describes as “the saving act of Greek art” (BT 7). Nietzsche’s depiction of this final, life-justifying effect of tragedy is difficult to grasp. It is hard to understand how it can be possible for the tragic chorus to both incite and alleviate a feeling of life aversion. In order to understand Nietzsche here, I think we need to take seriously his insistence that tragedy only functions when the Apolline and Dionysian work together. The lethargy and life aversion that occurs after an experience of Dionysian revelry is a description of what would happen if one were to have an unmediated Dionysian experience. This type of experience fails to affirm this life because it refers to another metaphysical realm, that of the primordial unity. When we come back to our everyday experience of reality and realize that our own life is not a glorious unity of revelry and intoxication, we are met with lethargy. This lethargy is not capable of being mediated by a purely Apolline or a purely Dionysian aesthetic experience. Pure Apolline art functions by glorifying the world around us, by presenting the pain and suffering that so often makes up our existence in a beautiful or deified way. However, the lethargic and life-averse spectator, who has not yet received the life-justifying effects of tragedy, cannot be consoled by
mere Apolline glorification: “Now no solace has any effect, there is a longing for a world beyond death, beyond the gods themselves; existence is denied, along with its treacherous reflection in the gods or in some immortal Beyond” (BT 7). For the broken, Dionysian man, life appears as nothing but suffering. An Apolline glorification of what the spectator can now only see as an arbitrary and cruel life is not enough to convince him that life is worth living. Conversely, a pure Dionysian experience of other-worldly intoxication, at this point, would exacerbate the problem, serving only to, as the saying goes, rub salt in the wound.

Thus, there must be a different kind of solution in which the Apolline and Dionysian aesthetic forces combine to form something new. Nietzsche’s own account of the combination of the Apolline and Dionysian is highly metaphorical and difficult to follow. I want to suggest a possible interpretation that can account for what Nietzsche takes the final result of tragedy to be: an ability to live with a heightened awareness of the pain of existence coupled with a state of mind that allows one to confront this pain in an affirmative state of mind. While an unmediated encounter with a fully Dionysian perspective leads to lethargy and life aversion, there is something valuable about this perspective that is retained in the final, affirmative moment of tragedy. This perspective can be understood through Nietzsche’s description of the creativity of the Heraclitean child “who sets down stones here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again” (BT 24). The perspective of Dionysian creativity is a valuable one. If we can learn to be like a child playing in the sand, who rejoices not only in the construction, but also the destruction of her sandcastle, then we can begin to
see life as valuable in all of its aspects. In tragedy, the spectator can achieve this perspective by practicing acts of creation. Nietzsche’s discussion of the creative activity of the tragic spectator begins in his account of the origins of tragedy. He claims that the “tattered shreds of ancient historical evidence” tell “us most decisively that tragedy arose from the tragic chorus and was originally chorus and nothing but chorus” (BT 7). In this early tragedy, there are no individual actors on stage portraying particular characters, but only the unified chorus. In spite of this, an intimation of the tragic hero is still present to the spectator—through the figure of Dionysus: “Dionysos, the true hero of the stage and center of the vision, is initially, in the earliest period of the tragedy, not truly present, but rather is imagined as being present; i.e. originally the tragedy is only ‘chorus’ and not ‘drama’” (BT 8). In the original tragedy, the spectator becomes an artist, himself creating and visualizing the image of Dionysus. Eventually, tragedy evolves when individual actors are added to the stage, when “the attempt is made to show the god as real and to present the visionary figure, together with this transfiguring framework, as visible to every eye” (BT 8). The appearance of actors on the stage, other than those making up the chorus, does not diminish the creative activity required of the spectator. Instead, it takes a new form: “Now the dithyrambic chorus is given the task of infecting the mood of the audience with Dionysiac excitement to such a pitch that, when the tragic hero appears on the stage, what they see is, not some grotesquely masked human being, but rather a visionary figure, born, as it were, of their own ecstasy” (BT 8, my emphasis). The spectator of this evolved form of Greek tragedy is still engaged in a creative activity, but
instead of envisioning the tragic hero in the midst of the chorus, he becomes an artist when he imagines the actor on the stage as a larger than life figure.

It is at this point that the Apolline becomes relevant in the process of tragic affirmation. Once the spectator has merged with the chorus, he transforms into the creator of his own Apolline, dream images:

> Involuntarily he [the spectator] transferred on to that masked figure the whole image of the god which he saw trembling magically before his soul, and he dissolved, so to speak, the reality of the figure into a ghostly unreality. This is the Apolline dream-state in which the day-world becomes shrouded, and a new, clearer, more comprehensible, more affecting world, but one which at the same time is more shadow-like, is born anew and presents itself, constantly changing, to our gaze. (BT 8)

The creative activity of the tragic spectator allows him to develop a new perspective on the world. The beauty and majesty that the Apolline outlook formerly provided is now tempered by an awareness of “the fearful, destructive havoc of so-called world history” and “the cruelty of nature” (BT 7). The Apolline dream-state is transformed into something “more shadow-like,” something that can accommodate the newly gained insight into the arbitrary cruelty that so often accompanies our existence. In this way, the Apolline and Dionysian work together to enable the tragic spectator to develop a new state of mind that not only confronts suffering, but also allows him to face it in an affirmative state of mind, similar to that of the Heraclitean child.

This reading solves the remaining two problems associated with Ridley and Silk and Stern’s contention that Nietzsche maintains the reality of the primordial unity in *The Birth of Tragedy*. First, it explains how the Dionysian can play a role in both the initial life-denying and subsequent life-justifying effect of tragedy. When combined with the
Apolline in the art of tragedy, the Dionysian transforms from providing a feeling of metaphysical unity to enabling the spectator to create a new perspective on the suffering of the world. Second, it avoids the question of whether a genuine affirmation of life is possible through tragedy. If tragedy affirms through momentarily inhabiting the perspective of the distinct metaphysical realm of the primordial unity, a question arises as to how the perspective of the primordial unity is supposed to effect a change of perspective in the tragic spectator. My reading avoids this problem because, by enabling the spectator to engage in creative activity through tragedy, it actively alters his perspective, allowing him to see the world in a way that both embraces the arbitrary and cruel aspects of existence and allows him, like the Heraclitean child, to rejoice in them just as much as he does the pleasant and beautiful parts of life.

III. Conclusion

In discussions about *The Birth of Tragedy*, the emphasis is almost always placed on the Dionysian for its ability to affirm life, overlooking the importance that the Apolline plays in tragedy. Even within *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche seems to give more credence to the Dionysian than the Apolline, saying things like: “the Dionysiac shows itself, in comparison with the Apolline, to be the eternal and original power of art which summons the entire world of appearances into existence” (BT 25). However, the role of Apolline art, and the role of the Apolline in art, is crucial to Nietzsche’s account of affirmation in the pre-Socratic Greeks. Ultimately, in tragedy, the Apolline is transformed and this new form is what allows the ancient Greek to view life, which
entails suffering, as justifiable. While the Dionysian is what allows us to get to the point where we can become creative, tragedy leaves us with an Apolline perspective—turning the spectator into an Apolline artist is the ultimate achievement of tragedy. Thus, the Apolline is not a mere veil, deception, or beautiful surface. Instead, it is a means of interpreting the world in a healthy way—as an artist.

The importance of this artistic perspective for life affirmation is something that remains throughout Nietzsche’s writings. While Nietzsche ultimately moves away from using ancient Greek tragedy to understand life affirmation, he retains a notion of the importance of this artistic perspective. Interestingly, in Nietzsche’s late writings the notion of an Apolline art drive disappears. This is a perplexing development, given the important role that the Apolline plays in tragic affirmation and the artistic perspective that is essential to it. The Dionysian, on the other hand, remains in Nietzsche’s late writings. In Chapter Three, I discuss the evolution of Nietzsche’s theory of the Dionysian from his early to his late writings, examining the extent to which the life affirming perspective of the artist remains and transforms from that of Nietzsche’s early conception in *The Birth of Tragedy*. 
In his mature writings, Nietzsche’s understanding of life affirmation changes: it is no longer mediated through ancient Greek art or tragedy. Despite Nietzsche’s move away from tragedy as a method for understanding life affirmation, elements of his early theory remain. In particular, Nietzsche retains a conception of the Dionysian as the ultimate affirmative symbol, while almost completely abandoning the Apolline as a means of life affirmation.¹ The Dionysian is no longer discussed exclusively in terms of art, but is presented as a contrast to the sickly, life-denying slave morality inherent in Christianity.

In this chapter, I ask two questions. First, how does Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian evolve from his early to late thought? Second, why does the Apolline drop out?

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, I begin, in Section One, by outlining some of the key characteristics of Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian in his mature writings. In Section Two, I demonstrate that the Apolline appears more life affirming than the Dionysian and ask, given this, why Nietzsche would abandon the Apolline in his mature writings and turn solely to the Dionysian. In Section Three, I consider Bernard Reginster’s answer to this problem: Nietzsche abandons the Apolline in his late writings because he changed his mind about the ability of deception or beautiful

¹ The Apollonian doesn’t completely fall out of Nietzsche’s writing; it comes up again in Twilight (“Skirmishes,” 10 and 11). But, on the whole, the Apollonian seems to fade into the background.
illusion, which he associates with the Apolline, to provide a genuine affirmation of life. Contra Reginster, I argue that Nietzsche does not, in fact, change his mind about the ability of deception or illusion to occasion life affirmation. Nietzsche’s argument, instead, is a historical one. I argue that Nietzsche came to abandon the Apolline because the cultural conditions of modern Germany are vastly different from that of ancient Greece. After the death of tragedy, the Apolline is no longer capable of providing a genuine form of life affirmation. In Section Four, I identify the continuities that exist between the early and late notions of the Dionysian. In Nietzsche’s mature conception of the Dionysian, its metaphysical trappings fade away, but its core meaning remains the same: it represents an acceptance of the world as it is, in all of its aspects, pleasant and painful.

I. Dionysus and Affirmation

Nietzsche’s mature conception of the Dionysian, which is life affirming, is often presented in contrast with Christianity, which is life denying. The very last line of Nietzsche’s final book, Ecce Homo, echoes this contrast: “Have I been understood?—Dionysus versus the crucified…” (EH, “Why I am a Destiny” 9). In his notebooks, Nietzsche elaborates on the difference between Dionysus and the crucified:

Dionysus versus the ‘Crucified’: there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering—the ‘Crucified as the innocent one’—counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation.— One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as holy enough to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the
harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich, and capable of deifying to do so. The Christian denies even the happiest lot on earth: he is sufficiently weak, poor, disinherited to suffer from life in whatever form he meets it. The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction. (WP 1052)

Dionysus and the crucified suffer similar fates—both endure horrible suffering only to be resurrected—yet they represent drastically different approaches to their suffering. On the Christian view, suffering is endured in this life only with reference to another life: the Christian heaven. On the Dionysian view, alternatively, suffering is experienced as a natural part of human existence. Instead of finding a way to confront suffering in this world, Christianity develops a narrative of another world that can justify this one—it invents another world for the sake of which we live this life. Nietzsche praises the Dionysian approach for being capable of accepting the inevitable suffering of life and embracing it, of seeing life as worth living without fleeing from the realities of this world.

Throughout his late writings, Nietzsche is critical of the Christian strategy of life affirmation, of valuing this life only with reference to another:

The Christian idea of God—God as a god of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit—is one of the most corrupt conceptions of God the world has ever seen; this may even represent a new low in the declining development of the types of god. God having degenerated into a contradiction of life instead of its transfiguration and eternal yes! God as declared aversion to life, to nature, to the will to life! God as the formula for every slander against ‘the here and now’, for every lie about the ‘beyond’! God as the deification of nothingness, the canonization of the will to nothingness! (A 18)
For Nietzsche, the problem with the Christian world view is that it is hostile to life, to our own finite human reality. In Nietzsche’s mature work, the Dionysian stands in opposition to this view of the world. It is a symbol for life affirmation, of a flourishing individual who is capable of affirming human life, suffering and all: “Saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems; the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian” (EH “The Birth of Tragedy” 3 and TI “What I Owe the Ancients” 5).

A Dionysian outlook on life allows one to love life even when facing suffering:

The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence—my formula for this is *amor fati.*” It is part of this state to perceive not merely the necessity of those sides of existence hitherto denied, but their desirability; and not their desirability merely in relation to the sides hitherto affirmed (perhaps as their compliment or precondition), but for their own sake, as more powerful, more fruitful, truer sides of existence. (WP 1041)

Nietzsche relates his late conception of the Dionysian to his idea of *amor fati,* or love of fate, which he describes as follows: “My formula for human greatness is *amor fati:* that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it—all idealism is hypocrisy

---

2 Nietzsche reiterates this view throughout his mature writings. See EH “Why I am a Destiny” 8: “The concept ‘God’ invented as a counter-concept to life,—it makes a terrible unity of everything that is most harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole deadly hostility to life! The concept of the ‘beyond’, the ‘true world’, invented to devalue the only world there is,—to deprive our earthly reality of any goal, reason or task!” and Z I “On the Hinterworldly”: “It was suffering and incapacity that created all hinterworlds, and that brief madness of happiness that only the most suffering person experiences. Weariness that wants its ultimate with one great leap, with a death leap; a poor unknowing weariness that no longer even wants to will: that created all gods and hinterworlds.”
towards necessity—, but to love it” (EH ‘Why I am so Clever’ 10). For Nietzsche, the conception of *amor fati* signals the importance of saying yes to life, in all of its facets. We cannot simply love the fun or pleasant aspects of our lives if we are to find true affirmation, but must affirm all of life. Further, Nietzsche argues here that true affirmation requires us to *desire* the parts of life we would otherwise deny—the terrible or arbitrary character of existence. Merely accepting the painful or unpleasant aspects of life is not enough to truly affirm it. Instead, to truly inhabit the Dionysian spirit, we must see it as valuable, something to seek out.\(^4\)

The concept of the Dionysian that appears in Nietzsche’s late work differs from the concept that appears in *The Birth of Tragedy* for several reasons. First, the late Dionysian is no longer discussed primarily in terms of the arts of music and tragedy. While Nietzsche’s discussion of the Dionysian in his late works still at times frames it as a “tragic” form of insight, thus retaining his tendency from *The Birth of Tragedy* to discuss it in terms of art, it is not a solely an aesthetic phenomenon.\(^5\) The way that one

\(^3\) Nietzsche also formulates his conception of *amor fati* as follows: “To the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world-affirming individual, who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and what is, but who wants it again *just as it was and is* through all eternity, insatiably shouting *de capo* not just to himself but to the whole play and performance, and not just to a performance, but rather, fundamentally, to the one who needs precisely this performance—and makes it necessary: because again and again he needs himself” (BGE 56). See also GS 276: “I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—this I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. *Let looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer!”

\(^4\) Nietzsche reiterates this need to seek out suffering in *On the Genealogy of Morality*: “Man, the bravest animal and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* negate suffering in itself: he *wants* it, he even seeks it out, provided one shows him a *meaning* for it, a *to-this-end of suffering*” (GM III 28).

\(^5\) Nietzsche often connects the late Dionysian to tragedy. For example, Nietzsche claims: “The tragic artist is not a pessimist, he says yes to the very things that are questionable and terrible, he is Dionysian” (TI ‘Reason’ in Philosophy, 6). See also, GS 370.
achieves Dionysian affirmation after *The Birth of Tragedy* does not require the mediation of the arts—one need not attend a tragedy, listen to Dionysian dithyrambs, or participate in a Dionysian festival. Instead, one must be capable of finding life worth living without the aid of art, by being the type of person who has the strength to value life as it is, to love life even with all of its attendant suffering.

Second, the late Dionysian is presented as something that valorizes this life, as something that does not need to look to another realm to justify suffering. A purely Dionysian experience as it appears in *The Birth of Tragedy*, on the other hand, affirms life through a complete evasion of the day-to-day world. Instead of encouraging the Greeks to face life head on, this early form of the Dionysian is an escape from our everyday lives through a belief in a distinct metaphysical realm of nature, ecstasy, and unity. The early Dionysian is affirming, largely, because it allows us to momentarily forget the sufferings of our daily lives; it functions as a means to distract us from the arbitrary and cruel nature of existence. Through recourse to a distinct metaphysical realm, and a flight from this life, the early form of the Dionysian allows us to believe that, at its core, the world is not arbitrary and cruel, but is home to a unified perspective of creativity and joy that outlasts our mortal bodies. When, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as the “foundation of all existence, that Dionysiac underground of the world” (BT 25), it sounds like something that is alien to humanity. Insofar as Nietzsche’s life-affirmation is meant to be *for* humans and for *this* world, then a Dionysian affirmation in the style of *The Birth of Tragedy* seems impossible.
Thus, Nietzsche’s late conception of the Dionysian differs significantly from his early conception of the Dionysian because, in the late conception, Nietzsche is no longer interested in a life affirmation that functions through an evasion of this world. Instead, he is interested in a version of the Dionysian that faces the suffering inherent in existence head on, even finds it desirable. This is not to say that there are not any aspects of the Dionysian that persist throughout Nietzsche’s career. In Section Four of this chapter, I give an account of what remains consistent in Nietzsche’s early and late conceptions of the Dionysian, establishing a continuity that runs between his early and late writings.

II. Dionysus vs. Apollo

Nietzsche’s choice to retain the Dionysian as a paradigm of life affirmation and to abandon the Apolline is puzzling because, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, his description of the Apolline appears more life affirming than the Dionysian, particularly when one compares each to Nietzsche’s account of life affirmation in his later writings. Nietzsche’s early conception of the Dionysian is similar to the Christian-moral world view in one respect: they both turn to an other-worldly, metaphysically distinct realm, be it in the form of a heaven or a primordial unity, to make sense of the suffering inherent in existence. The Apolline, on the other hand, affirms life by addressing directly the suffering of this world.

The Apolline gods are beautiful, grand, and larger than life, but they do not exist in a different realm than us. They are the only acceptable theodicy: “everything here speaks of over-brimming, indeed triumphant existence, where everything that exists has been deified, regardless of whether it is good or evil” (BT 3). The theodicy provided by
other forms of religion—Christianity is Nietzsche’s primary target, but he is also critical of Buddhism and Judaism—looks for meaning or solace in another world, through a transcendent God, heaven, or nirvana. What is remarkable to Nietzsche about the Greeks is that they founded a religion that glorified this life, without recourse to another realm. The beauty of the Olympians, as I argued in Chapter Two, is that they are free of any form of asceticism—the gods are deified and idealized whether or not they are good. These gods are brought to the level of man and “justify the life of men by living it themselves” (BT 3).

Unlike the purely Dionysian, which offers life affirmation through a complete forgetting or evasion of the suffering inherent in existence, the Apolline provides a glimpse of this suffering, enabling us to embrace it head on. According to Nietzsche, the Apolline was created out of and rests on a ground of suffering. Even within the thrall of Apolline illusion, one knows that it is an illusion born of suffering: “The Apolline Greek…could not conceal from himself the fact that he too was related inwardly to those overthrown Titans and heroes” (BT 4). Apolline illusion allows a glimpse of the pain and suffering inherent in existence because it is fundamentally based on it:

Whenever we encounter the ‘naïve’ in art, we have to recognize that it is the supreme effect of Apolline culture; as such, it first had to overthrow the realm of the Titans and slay monsters, and, by employing powerful delusions and intensely powerful illusions, gain view of the world and the most acute sensitivity to suffering. (BT 3)

The extraordinary struggles and trials endured by the Homeric heroes demonstrate how Apolline art provides its audience with an intimation of the suffering that it is based on.
Homeric epics depict the pain and suffering of heroes, but in a way that makes this suffering seem necessary, even beautiful. The glorified heroes of the epics are not remembered because they lived comfortable, content lives, but for the way that they endure and overcome the trials that are sent their way.

That the Apolline is capable of depicting the necessity of suffering in a life affirming way is further problematic: it resembles the role of Nietzsche’s later Dionysian, which requires an individual to face suffering head on. Apolline art does just this. It demonstrates how greatness is only accomplished through great suffering, through overcoming trials and tribulations. It allows us to hear about Achilles dragging Hector’s corpse through Troy on the back of his chariot without lamenting. Hector may be dead, but he is remembered as a great hero.

Thus, the late Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian, and his abandonment of the Apolline, is perplexing. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Apolline appears more life affirming than the Dionysian—it offers life affirmation in this world by giving meaning to the suffering inherent in existence. The Dionysian, on the other hand, provides life affirmation with reference to a belief in a distinct metaphysical realm. This leaves open several questions: why does Nietzsche leave the Apolline behind, how does Nietzsche’s notion of the Dionysian change, and why does the late Nietzsche maintain his allegiance to Dionysus?
III. A Possible Solution: The Affirmative Power of Deception

It is clear that there is a shift in Nietzsche’s thinking about life affirmation between his early and late writings. Not only does the Apolline almost completely drop out of his thinking, but his notion of the Dionysian also undergoes a dramatic change. Bernard Reginster offers one explanation for this shift in Nietzsche’s thinking, arguing that he changed his mind about the ability of genuine affirmation to be based on illusion, which he defines as an avoidance of or deception about the true character of existence. Since Reginster also argues that Apolline art affirms through an “avoidance or evasion, a deliberate ignorance of the true character of existence, or a disengagement from it,” it follows, on his reading, that Nietzsche ultimately changes his mind about the ability of Apolline art—but also tragedy, which similarly affirms via illusion, though to a lesser extent than Apolline epics or sculpture—to provide a genuine form of life affirmation.6

On Reginster’s reading, Nietzsche comes to see illusion as an inherently problematic mode of life affirmation because it prevents the individual from directly facing the arbitrary suffering of human existence: “at that time [in The Birth of Tragedy] Nietzsche has not yet developed the doctrine of the will to power and has only the illusions of art to prescribe as an antidote…Tragic wisdom, at that early stage, thus

---

6 Bernard Reginster, “Art and Affirmation,” in Nietzsche on Art and Life, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20. Julian Young puts forth a similar view, arguing that “the Apollonian solution to suffering implies a pessimistic assessment of the value of human life: that were Nietzsche to endorse it as his solution there would be no question as to his pessimism. For what the solution offers as a way of overcoming pessimism, of avoiding the pessimist’s judgment on life, is self-deception, telling oneself “lies.” But this implies that in the fullness of knowledge one would not affirm life as worth living. It implies, more briefly, that life is not worth living.” Julian Young, Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 48.
prescribes eschewing the Dionysian depths and remaining at the Apollonian surface with its beautiful appearances.”7 For Reginster, life affirmation through tragedy “requires that we avoid what The Birth of Tragedy characterizes as the ‘insight into the horrible truth’ of our condition.”8 Reginster contrasts this with Nietzsche’s later writings, in which “tragic wisdom ceases to be (partly) Apollonian and becomes a fully Dionysian wisdom...We are now capable of contemplating this truth without being driven to nihilistic despair because the revaluation made possible by the doctrine of the will to power actually enables us to welcome and affirm it.”9 On Reginster’s account, Nietzsche abandons the Apolline because it affirms life by preventing us from facing, head on, the true suffering of life.

In the following, I argue that Reginster is mistaken on two fronts. First, his conclusion about Apolline art is based on a misunderstanding about the way that Apolline art provides life affirmation. Second, Reginster overstates Nietzsche’s worries about illusion as a means of life affirmation in the late writings—Nietzsche disparages some, but not all, forms of illusion as life denying. I then offer an alternative interpretation of why the Apolline drops out of Nietzsche’s later writings. He does not abandon the Apolline as a source of life affirmation because he changed his mind about its

---


8 Reginster, The Affirmation of Life, 248.

fundamental ability to affirm life. What he changes his mind about is the ability of Apolline art to play a significant role in a society that has been corrupted for centuries by the forces Nietzsche associates with Christian morality.

First, my discussion of Apolline affirmation in Chapter Two already provides one reason to suspect Reginster’s explanation for Nietzsche’s abandonment of the Apolline. While Reginster argues that Apolline affirmation functions through beautifying illusion that deceives us about the true nature of existence, I have argued that the Apolline is affirming because it allows us to encounter the arbitrary and miserable nature of human existence in a way that makes it seem potentially desirable. The Apolline does not provide life affirmation through “the illusions of art” and “beautiful appearances” alone, but through taking a perspective on life that convinces us that the difficult aspects of life are needed because they are a means for achieving greatness. In Apolline art, we do not avoid the horrible truth of our human condition. Instead, we find an aestheticized means of facing this truth in a way that does not lead us to nihilism or despair.

Second, Reginster overstates the late Nietzsche’s misgivings about the ability of illusion to provide a genuine affirmation. Nietzsche’s own comments about this issue are conflicted, at times seeming to condemn any falsification of this world in our attempts at life affirmation, at others upholding falsification as a useful and laudable mode of life affirmation.10 Take, for example, Nietzsche’s comments about the superficiality of the Christian standpoint:

---

10 The debate over the value of illusion tracks alongside a similar debate about Nietzsche’s theory of truth. R. Lanier Anderson provides a lucid overview of the debate, noting that there is a fundamental tension in Nietzsche’s writing about the value and possibility of truth. On the one hand, in many places throughout his oeuvre, Nietzsche provocatively dismisses the possibility of truth. On the other hand, in just as many places
Let there be no doubt that anyone who needs the cult of the surface this badly has at some point reached beneath the surface with disastrous results. Perhaps there is even an order of rank for these wounded children, the born artists, who find pleasure in life only by intending to falsify its image, a sort of prolonged revenge against life. We can infer the degree to which life has been spoiled for them from the extent to which they want to see its image distorted, diluted, deified, and cast into the beyond—considered as artists, the _hominis religiosi_ would belong to the highest rank. (BGE 59)

Here, Nietzsche equates artists who find pleasure in life only by falsifying it to a religious mode of life affirmation, ultimately seeming to condemn art as highly as he does Christianity. In passages like these, Nietzsche seems wholeheartedly to denounce the Apolline mode of life affirmation—of remaining at the surface of things—indicating, as Reginster suggests, that he may have changed his mind since _The Birth of Tragedy_ about the life affirming effects of the Apolline.11

However, Nietzsche contradicts this type of statement elsewhere. In the _Gay Science_, he praises the Greeks’ method of hovering at the surface, claiming: “Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, throughout his writings, Nietzsche makes specific truth claims, indicating a commitment to truth. Anderson notes that the issue is not just about the possibility, but also about the value of truth: “In many key passages contributing to our textual dilemma, Nietzsche’s direct concern is not the existence or possibility of truth and knowledge, but their value. Therefore, an adequate interpretation must not only outline a background view that reconciles positive truth claims with some global falsification thesis. It must also show how Nietzsche can place such value on science and knowledge, and simultaneously praise illusion, or mere appearance.” (“Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption,” _European Journal of Philosophy_ 13[2005]:185-225, at 186.) In this chapter, it is my aim to discuss the value, not the possibility of Nietzschean truth. For a theory about the possibility of Nietzschean truth that addresses the issues of the falsification thesis, I refer you to Anderson’s article.

---

11 Nietzsche expresses a similar sentiment in WP 852: “The suffering, desperate, self-mistrustful, in a word the sick, have at all times had need of entrancing _visions_ to endure life (this is the origin of the concept of ‘blessedness’). A related case: the artists of decadence, who fundamentally have a _nihilistic_ attitude toward life, take refuge in the _beauty of form_—in those _select_ things in which nature has become perfect, in which she is indifferently _great and beautiful_!”
the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words—in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity!” (GS Preface 4). And in the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche articulates how the illusions of art need not always be life-denying:

Art, in which precisely the lie hallows itself, in which the will to deception has good conscience on its side, is much more fundamentally opposed to the acetic ideal than is science…An artist’s subservience in the service of the acetic ideal is therefore the truest corruption of the artist there can be, unfortunately one of the most common: for nothing is more corruptible than the artist. (GM III 25)

In these examples, Nietzsche sees the deceptive function of art as a benefit, as a way of affirming life. Lies and deception need not have a negative connotation. While they do not lead directly to a truth about the world, this does not mean that they cannot be a useful means of finding life genuinely meaningful and worth living. Apolline mythology functions in a similar way—the ancient Greek gods and goddesses do not actually exist on Mount Olympus. They are, in some sense, a lie. But this lie allows the ancient Greeks to face directly a fundamental truth about existence: that the world is arbitrary, cruel, and filled with suffering.

I do not take these contradictory statements as evidence that Nietzsche is confused or inconsistent. Instead, they are evidence that Nietzsche has a more nuanced view on the types of illusions or deceptions that serve to affirm life. In The Birth of Tragedy,

---

12 See also GS 107: “Honesty would lead to nausea and suicide. But now our honesty has a counterforce that helps us avoid such consequences: art, as the good will to appearance…As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be able to make such a phenomenon of ourselves.”
Nietzsche discusses several types of illusions that offer existential sustenance: the Socratic, the artistic, and the tragic: “One person is held fast by the Socratic pleasure in understanding and by the delusion that he can thereby heal the eternal wound of existence; another is ensnared by art’s seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes; a third by the metaphysical solace that eternal life flows on indestructibly beneath the turmoil of appearances” (BT 18). While each of these illusions are deployed by the “greedy Will” to find “some way of detaining its creatures in life” (BT 18), Nietzsche’s discussion of the death of tragedy and the rise of Socratism make it clear that, on his view, some illusions are more life affirming than others. Nietzsche regards the ancient Greeks of the tragic era as the pinnacle of a flourishing, healthy culture.\footnote{Nietzsche describes Greek tragic culture as “healthy” throughout \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}. For example, in his discussion of myth, Nietzsche claims: “Without myth, however, all cultures lose their healthy, creative, natural energy; only a horizon surrounded by myths encloses and unifies a cultural movement” (BT 24). Nietzsche also argues that Greek tragedy is “the essence of all prophylactic healing energies” (BT 21).} The illusions of Socratic culture, which Nietzsche sees as lasting from the death of tragedy to the present day, are infected with a false optimism that ultimately leads to its own demise. For Nietzsche, nineteenth-century Germany is at the cusp of recognizing that its own theoretical culture has its limits, of realizing “for the first time that it is an arrogant delusion to believe that we can penetrate to the innermost essence of things by following the chain of causality” (BT 18). The fundamental problem Nietzsche has with Socratism is not that it is an illusion—tragedy is, after all, also a form of illusion—but that it leads to life denial: “He [theoretical man] no longer wants anything in its entirety, complete with all the natural cruelty of things; this is how enfeebled and softened he has become.
by the optimistic way of looking at things” (BT 18). The problem, as Nietzsche articulates it here, is not that Socratism is deceptive, but that Socratic deception does not result in a healthy relationship with life. It is way of dealing with suffering that attempts to completely evade or avoid the full brunt of the suffering of existence.

In the *Genealogy of Morality*, Christianity and the acetic ideal function in a similar way to tragedy, by providing a framework for dealing with the suffering inherent in existence. Like tragedy and Socratism, Nietzsche describes the Christian worldview as a form of deception (though in this case, it is specifically self-deception). The acetic ideal is useful for detaining us in this life because it gives us a reassuring narrative—there is a God, heaven, hell, etc.—that turns the suffering inherent in our existence into something meaningful: “The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity—*and the ascetic ideal offered it a meaning!*” (GM III 28). Yet, the form of affirmation (or deception) offered by the acetic ideal brings with it unhealthy, life-denying side effects: “[the ascetic ideal] brought new suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, gnawing more at life: it brought all suffering under the perspective of guilt” (GM III 28). While Christianity and the

---

14 Nietzsche describes the inversion of noble values to slave values as a form of self-deception: “but this harsh matter of fact, this prudence of the lowest order, which even insects have (presumably playing dead when in great danger in order not to do ‘too much’), has, thanks to that counterfeiting [Falschmünzerei] and self-deception [Selbstverlogenheit] of powerlessness, clothed itself in the pomp of renouncing, quiet, patiently waiting virtue, as if the very weakness of the weak…were a voluntary achievement, something willed, something chosen, a *deed, a merit*” (GM I 13). Later, Nietzsche switches from the term “Selbstverlogenheit” to “Selbstbetrügerei” when making a similar point: “It is perhaps for this reason that the subject (or, to speak more popularly, the *soul*) has until now been the best article of faith on earth, because it made possible for the majority of mortals, the weak and oppressed of every kind, that sublime self-deception [Selbstbetrügerei] of interpreting weakness itself as freedom, of interpreting their being-such-and-such as a *merit*” (GM I 13).
acetic ideal are capable of providing the individual with a meaning and a direction for their life, this framework of meaning is one that ultimately undermines this life:

One simply cannot conceal from oneself what all the willing that has received its direction from the ascetic ideal actually expresses: this hatred of the human, still more the animal, still more the material, this abhorrence for the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and of beauty, this longing away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wish, longing itself—all of this means—let us dare to grasp this—a will to nothingness, an aversion to live, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life. (GM III 28)

Nietzsche is critical of forms of illusion that fail to affirm this life, that cause us to take an unhealthy stance towards our own existence. This Christian outlook stands in stark contrast to the affirming culture of the ancient Greeks, who used a framework of meaning in a way that did not, in Nietzsche’s terms, hate the human, animal or material, did not abhor the senses or reason, nor fear happiness and beauty.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Nietzsche describes a similar phenomenon in *The Gay Science*, differentiating between the needs of a healthy versus a Christian individual: “Every art, every philosophy can be considered a cure and aid in the service of growing, struggling life: they always presuppose suffering and sufferers. But there are two types of sufferers: first, those who suffer from a *superabundance of life*—they want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic outlook and insight into life; then those who suffer from an *impoverishment of life* and seek quiet, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and insight, or else intoxication, paroxysm, numbness, madness…He who is richest in fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, can allow himself not only the sight of what is terrible and questionable but also the terrible deed and every luxury of destruction, decomposition, negation; in his case, what is evil, non-sensical, and ugly almost seems acceptable because of an overflow in procreating, fertilizing forces capable of turning any desert into bountiful farmland. Conversely, he who suffers most and is poorest in life would need mainly mildness, peacefulness, goodness in thought and in deed—if possible, also a god who truly would be a god for the sick, a ‘saviour’; as well as logic, the conceptual comprehensibility of existence—for logic soothes, gives confidence—in short, a certain warm, fear-repelling narrowness and confinement to optimistic horizons…Nowadays I avail myself of this primary distinction concerning all aesthetic values: in every case I ask, ‘Is it hunger or superabundance that have become creative here?’” (GS 370).
While Nietzsche is critical of *some* forms of illusion and deception, it is not the case that he is opposed to *all* forms. He is clear that some forms of deception, including art, can be genuinely affirming and opposed to the perils of the Christian-moral viewpoint. The issue in these cases is not that deception, illusion, or avoidance of a truth about the nature of existence is involved, but that the deception, illusion, or avoidance of truth is in the service of affirming life:

> We do not consider the falsity of a judgement as itself an objection to the judgement; this is perhaps where our new language will sound most foreign. The question is how far the judgement promotes and preserves life, how well it preserves, and perhaps even cultivates the type. (BGE 4)

Deception, illusion, and lies can be extremely useful when they promote and preserve life. This is how Nietzsche describes Apolline art in *The Birth of Tragedy*—as an affirming form of deception. The Apolline keeps us at the surface of things, changing our perspective on the horrors of existence so that we can come to see them as beautiful. Thus, in Nietzsche’s later writings, he does not change his mind about the Greeks’ ability to affirm life through illusion because he thinks affirmation through illusion is always unhealthy, as Reginster suggests. Instead, he is clear that illusion is just one of many possible methods that people have used to affirm life.

I offer an alternative interpretation that can explain why Nietzsche abandons the Apolline in his later writings. The Apolline does not drop out because Nietzsche changed his mind about illusion, but because there was a cultural-historical shift after the death of
tragedy that made affirmation via Greek mythology untenable. On my reading, Nietzsche has two distinct notions of life affirmation: one that functions by means of ancient Greek tragedy and culture and one that functions through a direct confrontation with suffering. Ancient Greek affirmation operated without any reflective awareness that an affirmation was taking place: “the meaning of the tragic myth, as we have stated it, never became transparent and conceptually clear to the Greek poets, far less to the Greek philosophers; to a certain extent, their heroes speak more superficially than they act; myth is certainly not objectified adequately in the spoken word” (BT 17). This non-reflective form of life affirmation was possible because of the unique social and cultural conditions of the ancient Greek world—the ancient Greeks had a shared culture and religion that allowed them to believe in a unified system of mythology. This is

---

16 Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes make a similar argument about Nietzsche’s views on illusion in their “The Culture of Myth and the Myth of Culture,” in Individual and Community in Nietzsche’s Philosophy, ed. Julian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 52: “Nietzsche’s key objection to previous illusions, explicitly the Socratic illusion of rationalism and implicitly the illusions of Christianity, is not that they are illusions (that they are false) but that they are no longer useful illusions for the modern world.”

17 Ken Gemes offers a similar account. Gemes argues that there are two distinct types of Nietzschean life affirmation: naïve and reflective. Gemes cites the Greek nobles and masters, in GM I, as examples of those who exhibit a naïve form of affirmation. Reflective affirmation occurs in modern society, after the rise of the slave revolt. Gemes suggests one way of reconciling these seemingly contradictory views of affirmation in Nietzsche: “We might emphasize the temporal element. The naïve affirmation Nietzsche seems to attribute to the ancient Greeks is something that perhaps was only possible before the slave revolt led to two thousand years of self-vivisection. Nowadays, after man has become a so much more complicated an animal, such naïve affirmation is no longer possible...In our current state, then, the best that we can manage is the reflective affirmation of the kind exemplified in the eternal recurrence.” Ken Gemes, “Nietzsche, Nihilism and the Paradox of Affirmation,” in Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). However, Gemes’ account does not discuss life affirmation as it functions through art, illusion, or deception. Instead, his concept of naïve affirmation focuses on the spontaneity of the Greeks ability to find life meaningful, on their lack of a need to even think about it in the first place. His account also seems to imply that either form of affirmation cannot have anything to do with and avoidance or obscuring of the nature of human existence.

18 Nietzsche’s assessment of the unity of Greek religion, myth, and society is a commonly accepted idea among classicists. Jean Pierre Vernant, for example, emphasizes the relationship between the individual and their community in ancient Greece: “The individual establishes a relationship with the divine through
something that is no longer possible in Nietzsche’s modern culture, infected as it is with slave morality and the Christian worldview, so a new method of life affirmation must be created to accommodate these changes. Life affirmation in Nietzsche’s late writings is more reflective. Take, for example, his notion of eternal recurrence, which implies that one can affirm life only if one is willing to live their life over and over again, to accept the good and the bad in equal measure.¹⁹ This type of affirmation requires one to step back and assess the entirety of her life in order to find it worth living. Even though Nietzsche develops a form of life affirmation that differs from that of the ancient Greeks, his reverence for the Greeks in his later writings makes it clear that he does not abandon his belief in the ability of tragedy to provide this form of non-reflective life affirmation.²⁰ Instead, he develops another form of life affirmation to reflect the needs of a vastly different type of culture.

---

¹⁹ See GS 341. Reginster’s The Affirmation of Life has introduced an interesting new form of discussion about life affirmation in Nietzsche that is centered on the concept of the will to power.

²⁰ See, for example, TI, “What I Owe the Ancients” 4: “I was the first one to take seriously that wonderful phenomenon that bears the name ‘Dionysus’ and use it to understand the older, still rich, and even overflowing Hellenic instinct: one that can only be explained as an excess of strength.” See also WP 853 “Metaphysics, morality, religion, science—in this book [The Birth of Tragedy] these things merit consideration only as various forms of lies: with their help one can have faith in life” and WP 1051: “When the Greek body and the Greek soul ‘bloomed,’ and not in conditions of morbid exaltation and madness, there arose that mysterious symbol of the highest world-affirmation and transfiguration of existence that has yet been attained on earth.”
In an era corrupted by the forces of Christianity, any attempt at developing a life affirming mythology akin to that of the ancient Greeks would be co-opted by the life denying forces of the Christian worldview. For Nietzsche, ancient Greek mythology is unique and praiseworthy precisely because it is part and parcel of a healthy, flourishing culture. Throughout Nietzsche’s writings, other forms of “mythology,” which take the form of Christianity, Socratism, or Buddhism, just to name a few, are hallmarks of an unhealthy culture that, in their attempts to find meaning in life, actually end up generating life denying narratives. In an era dominated by the life-denying ethos of Christianity and slave morality, one cannot hope to bring about life affirmation by introducing a new mythology because it will inevitably become infected with life denying values.\footnote{Nietzsche was worried about the corruptibility of myth even in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}: “It should be noted that Alexandrian culture needs a slave-class in order to exist in the long term; as it views existence optimistically, however, it denies the necessity of such a class and is therefore heading towards horrifying extinction when the effects of its fine words of seduction and pacification, such as ‘human dignity’ and ‘the dignity of labour’, are exhausted. There is nothing more terrible than a class of barbaric slaves which has learned to regard its existence as an injustice and which sets out to take revenge, not just for itself but for all future generations. Who will dare, when faced with such menacing storms, to appeal with confident courage to our pale and tired religions which have themselves degenerated, down to their very foundations, into religions of the learned, so that myth, the necessary precondition of every religion, is already crippled everywhere, and the spirit of optimism which we have just described as the seed of our society’s destruction has seized power even in this area” (BT 18). In his first book, Nietzsche saw Socratism as the corrupting force. Many of the criticisms that Nietzsche lodges against Socratism can also be applied to Christianity and his critique of Socratism can be seen as an early version of Nietzsche’s later critique of the Christian worldview.} Apollonian art is not a tonic that can cure the ills of modern society because it, too, would soon become co-opted by the forces of slave morality.
IV. Why Dionysus?

While my discussion so far has addressed why Nietzsche, for the most part, abandons the Apolline after *The Birth of Tragedy*, it has not addressed why he continues to venerate the Dionysian. As I have already argued, this is particularly perplexing if one takes into consideration the way in which the Dionysian offers life affirmation in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that is, through a complete evasion of the truth about the nature of suffering in human existence. I argue that the reason Nietzsche holds onto the Dionysian as a symbol for life affirmation has little to do with whether or not it allowed the individual any insight into the nature of the world, but instead has to do with what it symbolized for the ancient Greeks. After *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche abandons the metaphysical nature of the Dionysian, shedding, if you will, its Schopenhauerian skin and retaining a more limited notion of the phenomenon.

This limited understanding of the Dionysian can best be understood in *The Birth of Tragedy* through Nietzsche’s metaphor of the Heraclitean child:

That striving towards infinity, that wing-beat of longing even as we feel supreme delight in a clearly perceived reality, these things indicate that in both these states of mind we are to recognize a Dionysiac phenomenon, one which reveals to us the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of primal pleasure and delight, a process quite similar to Heraclitus the Obscure’s comparison of the force that shapes the world to a playing child who sets down stones here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again. (BT 24)

This essential aspect of the Dionysian emphasizes a pure joy in creation and destruction, an ultimate acceptance of pure becoming. The Heraclitean child does not discriminate between creating and tearing down his castle of rocks, but takes equal pleasure in each
action. The child at the heart of the Dionysian symbol teaches us how to take joy in all aspects of existence, even those that might seem destructive, painful, or terrible. In this way, it serves as a metaphor for a radical acceptance of the world as it is—including its contingency, cruelty, and suffering.

In Nietzsche’s later writings, the metaphysical aspect of the Dionysian fades away, but the other aspects of the Dionysian, of taking pleasure in the process of creation and destruction, of being like the Heraclitean child, remain: “The desire for destruction, for change and for becoming (my term for this is, as is known, ‘Dionsysian’)” (GS 370). The late Nietzsche turns to the phenomenon of procreation as a metaphor for the Dionysian:

That is why the sexual symbol was inherently venerable for the Greeks, the truly profound element in the whole of ancient piety. All the details about the acts of procreation, pregnancy, and birth inspired the highest and most solemn feelings. In the doctrines of the mysteries, pain is pronounced holy: the ‘woes of a woman in labour’ sanctify pain in general,—all becoming and growth, everything that guarantees the future involves pain…There has to be an eternal ‘agony of the woman in labour’ so that there can be an eternal joy of creation, so that the will to live can eternally affirm itself. (TI “What I Owe the Ancients” 4)

Nietzsche views the pain and pleasure involved in the act of conceiving and having a child as a way of understanding Dionysian affirmation. Labor is a painful experience, yet it is celebrated because it brings with it new life. Unlike the Christians, who see sex as

---

22 Nietzsche reiterates the association of the Dionysian with joy in creation and destruction in Ecce Homo: “The affirmation of passing away and destruction that is crucial for a Dionysian philosophy, saying yes to opposition and war, becoming along with a radical rejection of the very concept of ‘being’” (EH, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 3).
depraved, as something to be ashamed of, the ancient Greeks fully embraced the entire process of procreation, its pleasure and its pains.

Nietzsche equates the Greeks’ metaphor of childbirth to his own metaphor of the eternal return:

What did the Hellenes guarantee for themselves with these mysteries? *Eternal* life, the eternal return of life; the future promised by the past and the past consecrated to the future; the triumphal yes to life over and above all death and change; the *true* life as the overall continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality. (TI, “What I Owe the Ancients” 4)

The cycle of life, of the sexual act that leads to procreation, but ultimately death, is analogous to Nietzsche’s conception of the eternal return, which asks us to affirm our lives in their entirety, by willing ourselves to live this life over and over again, to desire both the pleasant and painful parts. The act of procreation mimics this process: when we have a child, we choose to pass our lives on to another individual, ultimately asking another version of ourselves to live this life again for us. This modification of the Dionysian metaphor, which is more naturalistic than metaphysical, reflects the changes in culture that have occurred since the time of the ancient Greeks. We are no longer capable of believing in a Dionysian god, of participating fulling in a Dionysian festival, or believing that there is a primordial unity at the heart of nature. Instead, we must try to understand this by looking to phenomena in our finite human reality; we must affirm life without looking for any form of metaphysical beyond. The late Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian is an adaption of his early thought that takes into consideration the changes in culture, the devastating effects of Christianity.
V. Conclusion

Nietzsche’s abandonment of the Apolline and retention of the Dionysian after *The Birth of Tragedy* need not be seen as a sign of his inconsistent logic or lack of systematicity. Instead, it is a sign of a deeply historical thinker whose theories of life affirmation are tailored to the specific conditions of a particular culture. On Nietzsche’s reading, a belief in the metaphysical mythology of Dionysus is only possible in the context of ancient Greek religion and culture. In Nietzsche’s nineteenth-century Germany, ancient Greek mythology cannot possibly provide the same kind of metaphysical solace because people no longer have a unified belief in the Greek pantheon. It only makes sense, then, that there would be differences in Nietzsche theory of life affirmation in ancient Greece and modern Germany.

Further, the historical nature of Nietzsche’s thinking helps to highlight a continuity between Nietzsche’s early and late writings on life affirmation and illusion. While Nietzsche’s abandonment of the Apolline may seem, at first, to signal a deep change in his views about life affirmation, upon further investigation it becomes clear that Nietzsche alters his views to accommodate the differences between ancient Greek tragic culture and the culture of modernity. The ancient Greek form of life affirmation is something to turn to for inspiration, to admire with awe, but it not something that we can apply to our sickly, decrepit culture. We must find a different form of affirmation than ancient Greek tragedy to bring us out of the disease of slave morality. While Nietzsche does change his views, after *The Birth of Tragedy*, about the ability of Wagnerian opera
to bring about the rebirth of a tragic age, he does not ultimately change his mind about
the ability of ancient Greek tragedy to affirm life. Instead, his mature writings reflect the
awareness of a thinker who is sensitive to historical developments in culture and the way
they impact what is needed to affirm life.
As I argued in Chapter Three, Nietzsche’s notion of life affirmation shifts throughout his career. While Nietzsche understands tragedy as the pinnacle of life affirmation through art in ancient Greece, this is no longer viable after the advent of Christian morality. This has important implications for the way that Nietzsche understands art in his mature work. One interesting aspect of Nietzsche’s writings is that while he starts with an examination of a particular art form (tragedy), his late works move away from this. His late writings on art are less frequent and do not focus on a particular genre or example of art. Instead, they focus more on creativity and on the artists themselves. This emphasis is reflected in the literature on Nietzsche’s theory of art. Aaron Ridley, for example, explores how Nietzsche’s late writings on art give priority to the artist’s point of view.1 Alexander Nehamas, on his side, argues that, in his mature philosophy, Nietzsche “looks at the world as a sort of artwork; in particular, he looks at it as if it were a literary text.”2 Additionally, Julian Young emphasizes the mature Nietzsche’s turn to a point of view in which one creates oneself as an aesthetic phenomenon.3

---

1 Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art* (London: Routledge, 2007), chap. 5.
In this chapter, I propose a different approach to Nietzsche’s mature theory of art. Instead of focusing solely on the artistic and creative point of view of the great individual, I suggest we return to Nietzsche’s original strategy in *The Birth of Tragedy*: of beginning with an analysis of a specific example of (what Nietzsche deems “great”) art and using that to understand how that type of artwork reflects society in a life affirming way. Instead of focusing on ancient Greek tragedy or Wagnerian opera (as Nietzsche does in *The Birth of Tragedy*) as a paradigm for great, life affirming art, I suggest we focus on Shakespearean tragedy. Shakespeare is a useful figure for this task because he occupies a liminal space within Nietzsche’s writings. While Sophocles and Wagner are the stars, so to speak, of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Shakespeare looms at the margins of Nietzsche’s early thinking on tragedy. This is evidenced by his original intention, in his early notebooks, to include an entire chapter on Shakespeare.¹ There are many possible reasons why Nietzsche may have chosen to exclude the Shakespeare chapter from *The Birth of Tragedy*. Perhaps Shakespeare’s word dramas were incompatible with Wagner’s operas and Nietzsche’s early enthusiasm about the life affirming abilities of music. Perhaps he simply changed his mind about the overall trajectory of the book. Either way, without being able to definitively provide an answer, Nietzsche’s enthusiasm for Shakespeare, which extends throughout his entire career, can be seen as offering an alternative paradigm for modern tragedy, one that is free from his youthful allegiance to Wagner and one that opens up possibilities of applying his theory to non-musical tragedy.

¹ See WEN 7 [130].
Nietzsche’s early theory of tragedy is intimately connected to the issue of life affirmation. For the early Nietzsche, the greatness of art is tied up with its ability to affirm life. What remains an open question, however, is whether or not art retains its life affirming powers in Nietzsche’s mature work. In this chapter, I intend to answer two fundamental questions about art in Nietzsche’s late work. First, what would successful modern art look like? Second, can successful modern art be life affirming? I attempt to answer these questions by analyzing Nietzsche’s discussion of Shakespeare throughout his writings, tracing a thread of continuity that unites his early and late thinking on art and morality. Throughout his career, Nietzsche discusses Shakespeare as an exemplar of human and artistic greatness, which, in turn, is couched in a discussion of his resistance to Christian morality. I begin, in Section One, by addressing the interpretive problem of untangling Nietzsche’s seemingly contradictory comments about Shakespeare in *The Birth of Tragedy* and the early notebooks. In Section Two, I suggest an interpretive strategy for understanding, what at first appears to be, Nietzsche’s conflicting statements about Shakespeare. In doing so, I demonstrate that, for Nietzsche, Shakespeare is an exemplar of human greatness. In Section Three, I establish that a life affirming array of drives, which appear in exemplary humans like Shakespeare, is necessarily opposed to Christian-morality, which Nietzsche sees as life-denying. In Section Four, I examine how Shakespearean tragedy constitutes a form of art that resists the dominant, life denying mythology of slave morality. I conclude, in Section Five, by using Nietzsche’s writings on Shakespeare as a fundamentally irreligious author to identify a paradigm of successful modern art. I argue that, while successful modern art does not affirm life for its audience
in the same way as tragedy did for the ancient Greeks, it ultimately does contain a life
affirming stance in the wake of Christian morality.

I. Nietzsche and Shakespeare

The largest concentration of Nietzsche’s writings about Shakespeare appear in
*The Birth of Tragedy* and his early notebooks from 1869-1872. In his early writings,
Nietzsche characterizes Shakespeare in conflicting ways. Take, for example, the
following passage from Nietzsche’s notebooks: “Shakespeare, the poet of fulfillment, he
brings Sophocles to perfection, he is the *Socrates who makes music*” (WEN 7 [131]).

Within the context of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche’s association of Shakespeare with
Socrates might lead one to think that Nietzsche considered Shakespeare in a negative
light. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Socrates symbolizes a problematic paradigm that arises
after the death of tragedy and ushers in an era that prioritizes reason, rationality, and
science over myth and art. Nietzsche likens Shakespeare to Socrates in other places in his
early notebooks, arguing that Shakespeare is the ultimate fulfillment of Euripidean
drama, which he calls a form of Socratic art.5 According to the early notebooks,

“Euripides and Socrates signify a new beginning in the development of art: out of tragic

---

5 Nietzsche also equates Shakespeare with Socratic art in the following passage: “The authors of that
comedy knew why they revered Euripides as their genius: Euripides, who had placed the spectactor on the
stage, who had ploughed into the audience the taste for rehashing everyday life. Nobody noticed the
pessimistic and penetrating eye with which Euripides looked down on this art. But what was left behind for
all times was a new genre of *Socratic art*, which in alliance with the novel, has commanded the admiration
of the entire un-Greek posterity. *Drama* as the reflection of empirical reality, with a change of government
as its goal, the *novel* as the reflection of a fantastic and ideal reality with some sort of metaphysical
perspective: these are the two basic forms which found their final fulfillment and utmost saturation in
*Cervantes and Shakespeare*” (WEN 7 [124]).
knowledge. This is the task of the future, which so far only Shakespeare and our music have completely appropriated” (WEN 7[166]). Given Nietzsche’s distaste for the Socratic paradigm and Nietzsche’s equation of Socrates with Shakespeare, it might seem that Nietzsche considers Shakespeare, like Euripides, to be a Socratic artist worth disparaging. However, the early Nietzsche also praises Shakespeare, likening his tragedies to those of the ancient Greeks,\(^6\) who he clearly admires, and to Beethoven, who he esteems highly.\(^7\) In the passage quoted above, Nietzsche claims that Shakespeare “brings Sophocles to perfection.” Sophocles was among the Greek tragedians who Nietzsche admired greatly, making his later comparison of Shakespeare with Socrates that much more puzzling.

The difficulty of interpreting Nietzsche’s comment that Shakespeare is a “Socrates who makes music” is only compounded when we consider the importance of music to Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy. For the early Nietzsche, music is the source of ancient Greek tragedy, and it is the highest form of art out of which all others spring. Following Schopenhauer, Nietzsche sees music as the art form that is most capable of providing modernity with a truly artistic art form. For Nietzsche, music, be it in the form of an ancient Greek chorus, Bach, Beethoven, or Wagner, is capable of presenting the

---

\(^6\) According to Nietzsche, ancient Greek tragic myth maintains a similarity to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In both cases, words are inadequate to capture the full meaning of what is going on: “The meaning of the tragic myth never became transparent and conceptually clear to the Greek poets, far less to the Greek philosophers; to a certain extent their heroes speak more superficially than they act; myth is certainly not objectified adequately in the spoken word. The structure of the scenes and the vivid images reveal a deeper wisdom than the poet himself can put into words and concepts; the same thing can be seen in Shakespeare, whose Hamlet, for example, similarly speaks more superficially than he acts, so that the aforementioned lesson of Hamlet cannot be drawn from the words of the play, but from intense contemplation of, and reflection on, the whole” (BT 17).

\(^7\) “But can one still share the same company of anyone who is capable of conversing about Beethoven and Shakespeare?” (BT 22).
Dionysian. By focusing on the musical elements of Shakespeare’s writings, Nietzsche is categorizing Shakespeare as a Dionysian artist, who has similarities to the other great German musicians that Nietzsche venerates.

One explanation for Nietzsche’s association of Shakespeare with music is the poetic, even musical, quality of his writings. Nietzsche likely did not read Shakespeare in the original, as he did not have a solid mastery of the English language. He owned a copy of the Schlegel and Tieck translation of Shakespeare’s works. 8 This translation was the first to faithfully reproduce the entirety of Shakespeare’s works in German—previous translations altered the text to better suit the desires of the German public. 9 In his translations, Schlegel’s goal was to capture the poetic nature of Shakespeare’s language. 10 Nietzsche’s understanding of Shakespeare, via the Schlegel and Tieck translations, would have afforded him a good sense of the poetic aspects of Shakespeare’s writing. Thus, it is possible that Nietzsche’s comparisons of Shakespeare to Wagner and music are based primarily on the “musical” quality of Shakespeare’s poetry.

While Nietzsche’s association of Shakespeare with music and Wagner may simply be the result of the musicality of Shakespeare’s writing, there is another

---

8 Duncan Large notes his in his “Nietzsche’s Shakespearean Figures,” in Why Nietzsche Still?, ed. Alan D. Schrift (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 45: “He [Nietzsche] was given the standard (Schlegel-Tieck) German translations of the complete works [of Shakespeare] as a Christmas present in 1861 when he was seventeen, and thereafter—despite his ‘small English’—he acquired a thirteen-volume English edition of the plays and Thompson’s Illustrations of Shakespeare, as well as a variety of works of Shakespeare criticism.”

9 Translators prior to Schlegel and Tieck would, for instance, omit soliloquies, jesters, and ghosts in an attempt to make Shakespeare better conform to the classicist ideals of drama and tragedy.

explanation for this association. Opera, which was considered the leading art form in Germany at the time, was often used as an inspiration for staging not only ancient Greek tragedies, but also Shakespeare. In mid-nineteenth century Germany the most popular genre of theatrical production was opera. Opera has interesting relationships to ancient Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, both of which are relevant to this discussion. In the history of German thought, opera saw itself as the reinvention of Greek tragedy.\textsuperscript{11} Long before the nineteenth century, opera was seen as a way for modern audiences to fully appreciate tragedies of ancient Greece.\textsuperscript{12} While staging Greek tragedy, nineteenth-century German directors often looked to opera for inspiration—they turned to opera to deal with the problem of integrating the ancient Greek chorus into modern theatrical productions. The common association of ancient Greek tragedy with opera makes it easier to understand why Nietzsche would see Wagner’s operas as the rebirth of tragedy in the modern era—ancient Greek tragedy was a paradigm for bringing ancient Greece to a modern audience.

Opera also played a role in the nineteenth-century German understanding of Shakespeare. Productions of Shakespeare were often staged to appeal to the tastes of the German public, who were used to seeing operas performed and desired the operatic theatrical conventions that they were familiar with. Franz Dingelstedt (1814-1881), a


German director who put on productions of Shakespeare in the Munich Court Theater, Weimar Court Theater, and Vienna Court Theater in the mid-nineteenth century, staged Shakespeare’s works in ways that would resemble operas. He “utilized the vast personnel of the modern theater—actors, dancers, designers, musicians, technicians—and its increasingly sophisticated machinery to give Shakespeare grand operatic treatment.”

Dingelstedt’s style of production was to provide the audience with a grand spectacle. Nietzsche’s association of Shakespeare with Wagner, music, and the Dionysian may be a result of the tendency to stage Shakespearian tragedies in an operatic style. Further, Nietzsche’s contention that Shakespeare is a “fulfilment” or “perfection” of ancient Greek tragedy can be understood as a manifestation of the relationship between ancient Greek tragedy and opera.

The association of Shakespeare and opera, however, becomes complicated when we pay close attention to Nietzsche’s comments about opera in The Birth of Tragedy. In his first book, Nietzsche makes a distinction between popular opera and Wagnerian opera. Nietzsche sees popular opera as a “truly modern genre” that is “un-aesthetic” (BT 19). Unlike Wagnerian opera, which reaches the heights of aesthetic form and channels the Dionysian in its music, popular opera is anti-Dionysian and anti-artistic. This is

---

13 Williams, Shakespeare on the German Stage, 156.

14 Dingelstedt also put on productions of Wagner, which were thought to be an actualization of Wagner’s theory of the total work of art. Williams, Shakespeare on the German Stage, 156.

15 See BT 19: “A man with no artistic capability generates for himself a form of art precisely be being the un-artistic man per se. Because he has no inkling of the Dionysian depths of music, he transforms for himself the enjoyment of music into the reason-governed rhetoric of passion in sound and word in the stilo rappresentativo.”
because of the way that opera treats its music. Nietzsche is particularly critical of the *stilo rappresentativo*, which is a type of singing that is more expressive than pure speech, but lacks the fully musical elements of melody—it is a type of speak-singing. Opera’s recitative is problematic because it subordinates the music to the words. The music is only important as a vehicle or venue through which the words can be expressed—opera tames music.

The dominance of words over music in popular opera is a big problem for the early Nietzsche, who views music as essential for the rebirth of great art in the modern era. Popular opera, unlike Wagnerian opera, is “the expression in art of the lay mentality which dictates its laws with the cheerful optimism of theoretical man” (BT 19). Opera’s popularity stems from its ability to capture the predominant world-view of its time—that of theoretical man, which Nietzsche associates with Socratism. Popular opera, on the one hand, is a Socratic art that is tailored to the modern, theoretical man. Wagnerian opera, on the other, is a movement away from the Socratic tendency that has dominated western culture since the death of ancient Greek tragedy.

Nietzsche’s disparaging comments about popular opera complicate his views about Shakespeare’s relationship to opera in Germany. Are Shakespeare’s plays more like Wagnerian or popular operas? Nietzsche’s comments about Shakespeare in the notebooks are consistently positive, linking the author to music, ancient Greek tragedy and Wagner. However, it is unclear how Shakespeare’s plays, which lack grand operatic musical overtures or an ancient Greek chorus, are capable of channeling the Dionysian spirit that otherwise comes through the medium of music. How can Shakespeare’s plays,
which operate almost solely through the medium of words, be free of the charge that
Nietzsche makes against popular opera—of subjugating the music to the words?

II. Shakespeare and Human Greatness

I want to suggest an interpretive strategy for making sense of Nietzsche’s
seemingly contradictory statements about Shakespeare in the early notebooks. The
lynchpin for understanding Nietzsche’s notion of Shakespeare is, I take it, to be found in
his theory of drives and human greatness. Throughout Nietzsche’s career, he is concerned
with the development of great individuals. This concern with great individuals appears as
early as his notebooks of 1871, where Nietzsche claims: “Neither the state nor the people
nor mankind exist for their own sake; the goal lies in their peaks, in the great
‘individuals,’ the saints and artists” (WEN 11 [1]). Over the course of his writings,
Nietzsche becomes increasingly committed to the idea that the achievement of human
greatness is in itself a valuable goal. These great individuals are marked by their ability to
see beyond the values of the herd, which include compassion and humility. In a comment
from the late notebooks, Nietzsche argues that Shakespeare is an example of one of these
great individuals:

In contrast to the animals, man has cultivated an abundance of contrary
drives and impulses within himself: thanks to this synthesis, he is master
of the earth.—Moralities are the expression of locally limited orders of
rank in his multifarious world of drives, so man should not perish through
their contradictions. Thus a drive as master, its opposite weakened,
refined, as the impulse that provides the stimulus for the activity for the
chief drive. The highest man would have the greatest multiplicity of
drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured. Indeed,
where the plant ‘man’ shows himself strongest one finds instincts that conflict powerfully (e.g., in Shakespeare), but are controlled. (WP 966)

Here, Shakespeare is cited as an example of the highest man, who maintains a multiplicity of strong drives that conflict but are strongly controlled. I contend that we can trace Nietzsche’s late position on Shakespeare back to his early understanding of the author in *The Birth of Tragedy* and the early notebooks.

Before we proceed, we need to get clear about Nietzsche’s understanding of drives. There is some debate in the literature about what, exactly, Nietzsche means when he uses the term ‘drive’ (*Treib, Instinkt*).\(^\text{16}\) The drive concept does not originate with Nietzsche, but was frequently used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\(^\text{17}\) On one popular form of interpretation, Nietzschean drives are a type of inclination, impulse, tendency, desire, or urge.\(^\text{18}\) Others argue that this notion of drives is too simple and cannot accommodate the way that Nietzsche often describes drives in agential terms. For example, Nietzsche describes drives as philosophizing, using knowledge, playing games and presenting themselves in certain ways, lusting after power, maintaining perspectives,

\(^{16}\) Paul Katsafanas argues that Nietzsche uses *Treib* and *Instinkt* as terminological variants, preferring to translate both as “drive” because “instinct” has misleading connotations. See Paul Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 727. For the purposes of this chapter, I will follow Katsafanas in this usage.

\(^{17}\) The debate about drives was wide-spread and included scientists, philosophers, authors, and theologians including Charles Darwin, Condillac, Schiller, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Emerson, and Hölderlin, just to name a few.

and compelling other drives. In these cases, drives appear to act as agents. If we understand drives as dispositions, desires or inclinations, then it is difficult to accommodate Nietzsche’s claims about the ability of drives to act on their own. However, overemphasizing the agential capacity of drives runs into its own problems. Viewing drives as fully agential simply passes the buck of agency from the level of the individual consciousness to the level of the drives and thus offers no real insight in understanding how conscious agency functions.

In an attempt to find a middle path between these two views, Paul Katsafanas has suggested that a drive is a “disposition that induces an evaluative orientation.” On Katsafanas’ view “drives manifest themselves by structuring the agent’s perceptions, affects, and reflective thought.” This view has the virtue of being able to accommodate Nietzsche’s description of drives in agential terms, while still not reducing drives down to

---

19 See, for example, BGE 6: “Consequently, I do not believe that a ‘drive for knowledge’ is the father of philosophy, but rather that another drive, here as elsewhere, used knowledge (and mis-knowledge!) merely as a tool. But anyone who looks at people’s basic drives, to see how far they may have played their little game right here as inspiring geniuses (or daemons or sprites –), will find that they all practiced philosophy at some point, – and that every single one of them would be only too pleased to present itself as the ultimate purpose of existence and as rightful master of all the other drives.” See also, WP 481: “It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.”


21 This objection is borrowed from Katsafanas, who outlines three compelling reasons why overemphasizing the agential capacity of the drives is problematic. See Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology,” 730-1.

22 Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology,” 752.

23 Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology,” 752.
mere inclinations, desires, or impulses. It does this by viewing drives as entities that evaluate, but not as full agents. Drives are entities that color the way we view and evaluate the world. Differing drives can shape the way that we perceive identical situations.

Katsafanas’ definition of drives as a “disposition that induces an evaluative orientation” is helpful in explaining what Nietzsche means when he says, in his late notebooks, that Shakespeare is an example of a figure who embodies the “greatest multiplicity of drives.” On this account, a multiplicity of drives amounts to a diversity of perspectives or ways of evaluating the world. A multiplicity of drives is important for greatness because it allows one individual to see the world in many different ways. If an individual has a large multiplicity of drives, then they will have access to many different ways of interpreting, evaluating, and understanding the world and their experience of it.

For Nietzsche, having strong drives is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for greatness. For example, an individual with a strong drive towards becoming a pedantic philologist (of the sort that Nietzsche despises) would be dominated by the urge to produce research in a very narrow and particular way. It is easy to see how promoting a singular strong drive is not sufficient for human greatness. Imagine someone who is

---

24 Other recent scholars have followed in Katsafanas’ footsteps. For example, Christopher Janaway defines drives similarly, but with one important disagreement—unlike Katsafanas, who argues that drives cannot be eliminated, Janaway argues for the ability of drives to change over time: “a drive is a relatively enduring disposition of which the agent may be ignorant, but which, even when the agent has some awareness of it, operates in a manner outside of the agent’s rational or conscious control, and which disposes the agent to evaluate things in certain ways and to behave in certain ways.” Christopher Janaway, “Nietzsche on Morality, Drives, and Human Greatness,” in Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Normativity, ed. Christopher Janaway and Simon Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 190. Others, instead of trying to provide a straightforward definition, focus on the way that drives interact with one another. See Ken Gemes, “Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation,” The Journal of Nietzsche Studies 38 (2009): 38-59.
dominated by a master drive towards stamp collecting. It would be ridiculous to argue
that Nietzsche thinks the obsessive stamp collector or the pedantic philologist is an
example of human greatness.

Nietzsche also argues that Shakespeare, as an example of the highest man, has
drives that conflict but are strongly controlled. We can understand Nietzsche’s notion of
drives that are controlled in a single individual as a form of unity. Throughout
Nietzsche’s late writings, he often emphasizes the importance of the unity of an
individual’s conflicting drives: “Only this should be called greatness: the ability to be just
as multiple as whole, just as wide as full” (BGE 212). Nietzsche describes one of his
heroes, Goethe, as someone who “took as much as possible…within himself”, yet
“disciplined himself to a whole” (TI ‘Expeditions’ 49). We can understand Nietzsche’s
call for drives that conflict but are controlled as a unity formed out of a multiplicity.

Nietzsche’s suggestion, quoted in Section One, that Shakespeare is a “Socrates
who makes music” can be interpreted with reference to his theory of drives. In one of
Nietzsche’s last comments about Shakespeare from Ecce Homo, he gives an example of
how the bard is an individual with a multiplicity of drives brought together in a unity:

When I look for the highest formula for Shakespeare, the only thing I can
find is the fact that he conceived the type of Caesar. You cannot guess at
this sort of thing,—either you are it or you are not. Great poets create only
from their own reality—to the point where they cannot stand their work

25 This example is borrowed from Gemes, “Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation,” 57 n. 23.
26 Andrew Huddleston argues that an individual’s greatness is dependent on more than just the internal
constitution of their drives. They must also do great things. See his Nietzsche on the Decadence and
any more afterwards ... Whenever I glance through my Zarathustra, I walk around the room for half an hour, sobbing uncontrollably.—Shakespeare is the most poignant reading I know: how much suffering does it take for somebody to need to play the clown!—Have people understood Hamlet? It is not doubt, it is certainty that drives people mad ... But you need to be deep, an abyss, a philosopher, to feel this way ... We are all afraid of the truth ... And just to confess, I have an instinctive certainty that Lord Bacon was the author, the self-torturer of animals who is behind this uncanniest type of literature: what do I care about the pathetic drivel of American idiots and asses? But the strength for the most powerful reality of vision is not just compatible with the most powerful strength for action, for monstrosities of actions, for crimes—*it even presupposes it* ... We do not know nearly enough about Lord Bacon, the first realist in every great sense of the term, to know what he did, what he wanted, what he experienced in himself ... (EH “Why I am So Clever” 4)

What is relevant here is Nietzsche’s assertion that Shakespeare is just a pseudonym for Francis Bacon. Nietzsche suggests this, in part, because he contends that great artists, who create characters like Caesar, must have some of the attributes of these characters within themselves. For someone to be able to create both Caesar and Hamlet—men of action and inaction, of joy and sorrow—they must themselves be filled with strength, indecision, dominance, and tragedy. “Shakespeare,” the purported son of a Stratford wool merchant who would have had little access to travel or education, is an unlikely candidate for an individual of such character, whose writings contain an exemplary array of vocabulary and a large range of references. It makes much more sense, to Nietzsche, to assume that Shakespeare was actually just Bacon in disguise.

---

27 Nietzsche repeats the equation of Shakespeare with Bacon in WP 848. Nietzsche is not alone in questioning the identity of Shakespeare. Large notes that “in Nietzsche’s day the leading theory was that ‘Shakespeare’ was a front for Francis Bacon who, because of his close association with the court, had been obliged to publish all his plays and the majority of his poems under a pseudonym (Large, “Nietzsche’s Shakespearean Figures,” 56).
What is significant to both passages quoted above is the insistence that Shakespeare is an individual of a multifarious yet united nature. Nietzsche characterizes as a “Socrates who makes music,” is an individual who has multiple and conflicting interests, both musical and Socratic. He combines the musical spirit of ancient Greek tragedy with Socrates, who represents the death of Greek tragedy and a move towards a faith in logic, reason, and science. Alternatively, if Bacon is also Shakespeare, then he too is a “Socrates who makes music.” If Bacon, the great inductive methodologist, is also a brilliant poet, then he contains both the spirit of science, logic, and rationality (which Socrates represents) and the spirit of music (which is the basis of great tragedy). If Bacon is also Shakespeare, then he is both one of the most remarkable scientists and artists of his time. An individual capable of being a great scientist and artist would require a great multitude of strong drives.

Understood in this way, Nietzsche’s comment about Shakespeare as a “Socrates who makes music” begins to make much more sense. Shakespeare (or Bacon) is an individual who contains a multitude of drives that conflict strongly. The seemingly contradictory nature of this statement is no longer a puzzle, but should be understood with reference to Nietzsche’s theory of drives.

III. Morality: Ancient and Modern

One of the reasons Nietzsche thinks Shakespeare is exemplary is that he has managed to maintain a healthy assortment of conflicting but unified drives in the wake of
Christian morality, which, Nietzsche argues, perverts the natural assortment of drives.\textsuperscript{28} Nietzsche describes the process of the perversion of drives in the \textit{Genealogy}, where he calls morality the “danger of dangers” (GM Preface 6). Here, he contrasts the Greek nobility, who have healthy drives that are allowed to flow freely, with those infected with slave morality:

Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says “no” to an “outside,” to a “different,” to a “not-self”: and \textit{this} “no” is its creative deed. This reversal of the value-establishing glance—this \textit{necessary} direction toward the outside instead of back onto oneself—belongs to the very nature of \textit{ressentiment}: in order to come into being, slave-morality always needs an opposite and external world; it needs, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to be able to act at all,—its action is, from the ground up, reaction. The reverse is the case with the noble manner of valuation: it acts and grows spontaneously, it seeks out its opposite only in order to say “yes” to itself still more gratefully and more jubilantly—its negative concept “low” “common” “bad” is only an after-birth, a pale contrast-image to its positive basic concept, saturated through and through with life and passion: “we noble one’s, we good ones, we beautiful ones, we happy ones!” (GM I 10).

\textsuperscript{28} There is a debate in the literature about the way a healthy, unified assortment of drives can come about. Christopher Janaway puts the questions as follows: “So we have to face a question about these states of wholeness, totality, or unity among conflicting elements that Nietzsche tends to associate with being a great or a higher human being: are they ever, or to any extent, brought about by self-awareness, intention, and action (details still to be specified), or are they formations of drives and instincts that come about independently of any agency, in the manner of ‘the rare cases of powerfulness in soul and body, the strokes of luck among humans’ he mentions in the \textit{Genealogy} (GM III, 4)” (Christopher Janaway, “Nietzsche on Morality, Drives, and Human Greatness,” 193). Janaway identifies two different methods of answering this question: wholeness of drives arises by chance or by agency. Brian Leiter, in his \textit{Nietzsche on Morality} (London: Routledge, 2002), advocates for the chance model. Janaway suggests a different model, arguing that “in Nietzsche’s picture our attitudes of self-affirmation or self-negation might in addition \textit{cause} alterations to our drives and their relations to one another in such a way as to move them nearer to a state in which they satisfy the internal conditions for human greatness” (195). Here, I follow Janaway in his assertion that Christian morality is capable of causing alterations to our drives.
For Nietzsche, forms of morality (including slave morality) can be understood as a result of a certain configuration of drives. On Nietzsche’s view, the “well born” (or noble) Greeks were capable of finding themselves happy spontaneously because their natural drives were allowed to freely express themselves. In contrast, those living under the yolk of slave morality restrict this free expression by suppressing their natural aggressive drives, which are redirected inwards into new forms. Nietzsche argues that this suppression of drives begins when people who he calls “slaves” or “weak” start, due to their own powerlessness, to suppress their natural drive of striking back against their oppressors. The weak are forced to suppress this drive in order to appease their competing drive of self-preservation. However, their natural aggressive drives do not disappear, but are instead diverted into new forms that do not threaten their drive towards self-preservation and help to preserve their feeling of power. The weak find power by

---

29 Nietzsche explicitly links drives and morality in WP 966: “Moralities are the expression of locally limited orders of rank in his multifarious world of drives.”

30 In “Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation,” Ken Gemes suggests that “Nietzsche as a naturalist believes that as humans we come with a rich panoply of inherited drives” (57, n. 23). He contends that these drives are “turned against themselves through the demands of civilization” in “Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Paradox of Affirmation,” in Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). On Gemes’ account, “in order to maintain a civil society our natural aggressive drives need to be largely curbed from direct external manifestations, so they are redirected inwards, against themselves” (Gemes, “Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Paradox of Affirmation”). For more of Gemes’ discussion about drives and affirmation, see, “Nihilism and the Affirmation of Life: A Review of and Dialogue with Bernard Reginster,” European Journal of Philosophy 16 (2008): 459-466.

31 Nietzsche uses the example of the ancient Greeks as a useful counterpoint for understanding just how much of an effect the Christian mindset has had on morality: “The extent to which this [the Judeo-Christian notion of sin] has succeeded in Europe is best brought out by how alien Greek antiquity—a world without feelings of sin—strikes our sensibility as being, despite all the good will expended by entire generations and many excellent individuals to approach and incorporate this world. ‘Only when you repent does God have mercy on you’—to a Greek, that is an object of ridicule and annoyance; he would say, ‘Maybe slaves feel that way.’ What is here being presupposed is a being who is powerful, supremely powerful and yet enjoys revenge: his power I so great that no harm whatsoever can be done unto him except in matters of honour” (GS 135).
reinterpreting power and helplessness. In this process, the powerful are rebranded as “evil” and the powerless are re-described as “good.” The problem with this, for Nietzsche, is that it forces those under the throes of slave morality to feel guilty about what, in the absence of slave morality, is simply a natural drive towards power. With the advent of Christianity, this suppression of our natural drives to power becomes crystalized in the cultural milieu, which defines these natural aspects of ourselves as sinful and in violation of God. As a result, we are left to feel guilty about the existence of natural parts of ourselves.\(^{32}\)

On Nietzsche’s story, the ancient Greek individual has a better chance of experiencing a free expression of drives because they have not been infected, for centuries, with slave morality.\(^{33}\) While Nietzsche posits a difference between the noble and the weak in this ancient Greek period, these initial slaves exist in a time prior to the codification of slave-morality into the dominant western world view. Thus, the drives of

---

\(^{32}\) The Christian moral viewpoint is also problematic, on Nietzsche’s account, because it cultivates drives that dominate the individual: “the virtues (such as diligence, obedience, chastity, piety, justice) are most harmful to their possessors, being drives which dominate them all to violently and covetously and in no way let reason keep them in balance with the other drives. When you have a virtue—a real, complete virtue (and not just a small drive towards some virtue)—you are its victim! But the neighbor praises your virtue precisely on that account! One praises the diligent even if he should harm his vision of the originality and freshness of his spirit...What is, therefore, first really praised when virtues are praised is their instrumental nature and then the blind drive in every virtue that refuses to be held in check by the overall advantage to the individual—in short, the unreason in virtue that leads the individual to allow himself to be transformed into a mere function of the whole. The praise of virtues is the praise of something privately harmful—the praise of drives which deprive a human being of his noblest selfishness and of the strength for the highest form of self-protection” (GS I 21). The virtues of Christian morality deprive a human of realizing a genuine multiplicity of drives, which, as noted above, is essential for Nietzsche’s notion of human greatness.

\(^{33}\) Nietzsche emphasizes the differences in the character of ancient Greek and modern individuals. See, for example, D 172, GS 107, and BGE 229.
the ancient Greek individual would be structured in a fundamentally different way than
the drives of an individual living under the sway of Christianity.  

The perversion of drives that occurs under Christian morality also has
implications for the type of art that Nietzsche thinks best serves modernity. The art that
best served the ancient Greek nobles must necessarily be different from great art created
under slave morality. The ancient Greek individual, who is free from the constraints of
Christian morality, has drives that are allowed to express themselves naturally. If we look
to Nietzsche’s paradigms of great Greek art as presented in *The Birth of Tragedy*—pre-
Socratic tragedy, mythology, and epics—we can see how these forms of art operate
outside the bounds of Christian morality. Nietzsche describes the difference between the
ancient Greek and Christian-moral views of misfortune and guilt:

> *Justice which punishes.*—Misfortune and guilt—Christianity has placed
these two things on a balance: so that, when misfortune consequent on
guilt is great, even now the greatness of the guilt itself is still involuntarily
measured by it. But this is not *antique,* and that is why the Greek tragedy,
which speaks so much yet in so different a sense of misfortune and guilt,
is a great liberator of the spirit in a way in which the ancients themselves

---

34 Nietzsche reiterates this point with reference to philosophers. The limiting of one’s natural drives, which
is a result of Christian morality, has infiltrated the way that modern individuals, particularly academics,
approach ideas. The restriction of drives that occurs through slave morality transfers to the way that we
tend to specialize into specific arenas of thought: “When encountering a world of ‘modern ideas’ which
would gladly banish everyone into a corner and ‘specialization,’ a philosopher (if there could be
philosophers today) would be compelled to locate the greatness of humanity, the concept of ‘greatness,’” in
the very scope and variety of humanity, in its unity in multiplicity. He would determine even value and
rank according to how much and how many things someone could carry and take upon himself, how far
someone could stretch his responsibility. Today, the will is weakened and diluted by the tastes and virtues
of the times, and nothing is as timely as weakness of will: this is why precisely strength of will and the
hardness and capacity for long-term resolutions must belong to the concept of ‘greatness,’ in the
philosopher’s ideal” (BGE 212). Nietzsche’s ideal of a modern philosopher is someone who not only
contains a multiplicity of drives, but also has the strength of will to unite these drives into a unity. This type
of philosopher is an ideal in modernity because of the tendency towards specialization, which makes
realizing a diversity of drives in the first place more difficult. The great philosopher must swim against the
tides of culture and the Christian-moral worldview in order to achieve this multiplicity.
could not feel it. They were still so innocent as not to have established an ‘adequate relationship’ between guilt and misfortune. The guilt of their tragic heroes is, indeed, the little stone over which they stumble and perhaps break an arm or put out an eye: antique sensibility commented: ‘Yes, he should have gone his way a little more cautiously and with less haughtiness!’ But it was reserved for Christianity to say: ‘Here is a great misfortune and behind it there must lie hidden a great, equally great guilt, even though it may not be clearly visible! If you, unfortunate man, do not feel this you are obdurate—you will have to suffer worse things!’ (D 78)

Ancient Greek mythology is characterized by gods who are reflections of human beings who have flaws, who are greedy and selfish, who cheat on each other, and fight for power. Unlike the ideals of Christian morality, these Gods do not restrict their natural drives to power or aggression. Zeus takes the throne at Mount Olympus by killing his father Cronus, who overthrew his father before him. Hades abducts Persephone and attempts to trap her in the underworld. In the Iliad, Athena plays favorites, helping the Achaeans conquer Troy. Greek myth is far from promoting a narrative that would undermine an individual’s natural drive to power. Instead, Greek myths show people of great strength and power vying for more power—there is no hint of asceticism here.

Agamemnon sacrifices his own daughter so that he can participate in battle. And

---

35 According to J.P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Nanquet, ancient Greek tragedy is characterized by a feeling of moral ambiguity, which lacks a strong sense of right and wrong: “The tragic writers are not content simply to oppose one god to another, Zeus to Prometheus, Artemis to Aphrodite, Apollo to Athena to the Erinyes. The divine universe as a whole is presented, at a deeper level, as being in a state of conflict. The powers it comprises are presented grouped into violently contrasted categories between which concord is difficult or impossible to achieve because they belong to different levels.” See their Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece, trans. Janet Lloyd (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981), 15. They continue: “The tragic message gets across to him only provided he makes the discovery that words, values, men themselves, are ambiguous, that the universe is one of conflict; only if he relinquishes is earlier convictions, accepts a problematical vision of the world and, through the dramatic spectacle, himself acquires a tragic consciousness (18).

36 Vernant and Vidal-Nanquet argue that ancient Greek tragedy is marked by a grappling with one’s place in an order-less world: “What is this man’s place in world that is at once social, natural, divine and ambiguous, rent by contradictions, in which no rule appears definitively established, one god fights against
Clytemnestra plots to kill Agamemnon because he killed their daughter. Odysseus is lauded for his cunning trickery and does not feel guilty when he slaughters all of Penelope’s suitors. Oedipus pokes out his own eyes not because he is ashamed of taking over someone else’s kingdom and marrying his wife—actions that would be chastised under Christian morality—but for a more egregious error: his discovery that the kingdom he conquered was his father’s and his bride his mother. These great forms of ancient Greek art do not limit an individual’s drives to power, but provide a mirror to the individual by exemplifying the range of drives possible in great Gods and heroes.

While Nietzsche believes in the affirming power of ancient Greek art, he is skeptical of the ability of art to affirm in modernity. This is because the majority of modern art, in his estimation, has been corrupted by Christian morality and the acetic ideal: “An artist’s subservience in the service of the acetic ideal is therefore the truest corruption of the artist there can be, unfortunately one of the most common: for nothing is more corruptible than the artist” (GM III 25). Even though Nietzsche thinks that the majority of modern art has been corrupted by slave morality, he does not rule out the possibility that some art can be free from this sort of corruption. He thinks that some modern art exists “in which the will to deception has good conscience on its side” (GM III 25). By Nietzsche’s lights, in modernity, if art is to be considered successful, it must resist the pull of Christian morality. What remains an open question, however, is whether

another, one law against another and in which, even in the course of the play’s action, justice itself shifts, twists and is transformed into its contrary” (Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece, 9).
Nietzsche thinks modern art, even if it has “good conscience on its side,” is capable of engendering an affirmation of life.

IV. Shakespeare: The Non-Moral Artist

Before taking on the question of whether, for the mature Nietzsche, great art has the potential to retain its life-affirming abilities after the death of tragedy, we need to take a close look at examples of modern art that Nietzsche deems “great.” For Nietzsche, even within ancient Greek culture, only the greatest types of art have the capacity to affirm life. So, to understand if the art of modernity can be life affirming, we must first look at an example. The tragedies of Shakespeare can be instructive for our purposes here.

One aspect of Shakespeare’s tragedies that Nietzsche consistently praises throughout the entirety of his career is their anti-religious nature.

Irreligiosity of artists. —Homer is so much at home among his gods, and as a poet takes such pleasure in them, that he at any rate must have been profoundly unreligious; with that with which popular belief presented him—a paltry, crude, in part horrible superstition—he trafficked as freely as a sculptor with his clay, that is to say with the same ease and impartiality as that possessed by Aeschylus and Aristophanes and which in more recent times distinguishes the great artists of the Renaissance, as it does Shakespeare and Goethe. (HH 125)

On Nietzsche’s view, Shakespeare shares something with great ancient Greek artists like Homer, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes—his work is profoundly unreligious.\(^{37}\) The

importance of Shakespeare’s irreligiosity is more profound because he is writing under the influence of slave morality, which, unlike ancient Greek morality, perverts the drives and leads to an unhealthy approach to life.

Shakespeare’s resistance to Christian morality is displayed in the types of characters that appear in his writings. This is exemplified in the character of Brutus:

_In praise of Shakespeare._—The most beautiful thing I can say in praise of Shakespeare as a human being is this: he believed in Brutus and didn’t cast a speck of suspicion on this type of virtue! To him he devoted his best tragedy—it is still called by the wrong name—to him and to the most dreadful epitome of lofty morality. Independence of soul! That’s what’s at stake here! No sacrifice can be too great for that: one has to be capable of sacrificing even one’s dearest friend for it, even if he should be the most marvelous human being, the ornament of the world, the genius without peer—if one loves freedom as the freedom of great souls and this freedom is endangered because of him: that is what Shakespeare must have felt! The height at which he places Caesar is the finest honour he could bestow on Brutus: only thus does he raise Brutus’ inner problem to immense proportions as well as the strength of mind that was able to cut this knot! And was it really political freedom that drove this poet to sympathize with Brutus—and turned him into Brutus’ accomplice? Or was political freedom only a symbolism for something inexpressible? Could it be that we confront some unknown dark event and adventure from the poet’s own soul about which he wanted to speak only in signs? What is all of Hamlet’s melancholy compared to that of Brutus! (GS 98)

Nietzsche praises Shakespeare for being capable of creating a character like Brutus—only a great individual would be able to imagine such a courageous individual who resists the trappings of Christian morality.\(^{38}\) Brutus is so exceptional to Nietzsche because his

---

\(^{38}\) Nietzsche’s discussion of Shakespeare follows on the heels of a century-long debate in Germany about the status of Shakespearean drama as an acceptable form of art. A. W. Schlegel was an active part of this
actions—overthrowing his friend Caesar for the sake of his own freedom—do not take into consideration the restraints of Christian morality. Brutus sees no reason that Caesar—who, according to Casca, recently “fell down in the marketplace and foamed at the mouth and was speechless” (Act 1, Sc. 2, 263-4)—should be crowned king. In addition to Caesar’s failing health, Brutus worries that the power of the crown will go to his head: “And for my part/ I know no personal cause to spurn at him,/ but for the general. He would be crowned:/ How that might change his nature, there’s the question” (Act 3, Sc. 1, 10-14). Brutus’ desire to remain free usurps any feelings of friendship he has towards Caesar. His own honor is the most important: “Set honor in one eye and death i’ th’ other/ And I will look on both indifferently;/ For let the gods so speed me as I love/ The name of honor more than I fear death” (Act 1, Sc. 2, 93-96). Brutus’ actions are those of an individual whose drive to power is allowed to flow freely. He has not been perverted by the demands of Christian morality. For Nietzsche, Shakespeare’s greatness is tied to his ability not only to be, but to portray, this type of individual.

Nietzsche also discusses the irreligiosity of Shakespeare with regard to the way that his plays have been interpreted, arguing that they should not be judged against the standards of Christian morality:

---

debate, which also included his brother Friedrich Schlegel, Herder, and Goethe, just to name a few. Nietzsche’s view of Shakespeare as portraying exemplary individuals is not new within this debate. A. W. Schlegel, for example, also viewed Shakespeare as a uniquely capable of presenting, within his dramas, exemplars for humanity. For a discussion of Schlegel’s views on Shakespeare, see Kristin Gjesdal, “The Theatre of Thought: A. W. Schlegel on Modern Drama and Romantic Criticism,” in The Philosophy of Theatre, Drama, and Acting, ed. Tom Stern (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), chapter 3.
On the morality of the stage.—Whoever thinks that Shakespeare’s theatre has a moral effect, and that the sight of Macbeth irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition, is in error: and he is again in error if he thinks Shakespeare himself felt as he feels. He who is really possessed by raging ambition beholds this its image with joy; and if the hero perishes by his passion this precisely is the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy. Can the poet have felt otherwise? How royally, and not at all like a rogue, does his ambitious man pursue his course from the moment of his great crime!…Do you suppose that Tristan and Isolde are preaching against adultery when they both perish by it? This would be to stand the poets on their head: they, and especially Shakespeare, are enamoured of the passions as such and not least of their death-welcoming moods—those moods in which the heart adheres to life no more firmly than does a drop of water to a glass. It is not the guilt and its evil outcome they have at heart, Shakespeare as little as Sophocles (in Ajax, Philoctetes, Oedipus): as easy as it would have been in these instances to make guilt the lever of the drama, just as surely has this been avoided. The tragic poet has just as little desire to take sides against life with his images of life! He cries rather: ‘it is the stimulant of stimulants, this exciting, changing, dangerous, gloomy and often sun-drenched existence! It is an adventure to live—espouse what party in it you will, it will always retain this character!’—He speaks thus out of a restless, vigorous age which is half-drunk and stupefied by its excess of blood and energy—out of a wickeder age than ours is: which is why we need first to adjust and justify the goal of a Shakespearean drama, that is to say, not to understand it. (D 240)

By Nietzsche’s lights, we should not understand Macbeth as a tragedy that warns us against lust for power. Nor should we understand Tristan and Isolde as a tale that cautions against adultery. Guilt is not the mechanism of these dramas. Instead, great tragedies—ranging from Sophocles to Shakespeare—should be understood as presenting their audience with a vision of life that is healthy, full of energy, exciting, and dangerous. We are not meant to fear the events of the tragedy but to revel in the vibrancy of life.

Nietzsche’s evaluation of Shakespeare as an artist who resists Christian moral interpretation can be traced to The Birth of Tragedy, where he takes issue with the German literary historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus’ moralistic reading of Shakespeare:
Anyone who can still speak only about the kinds of surrogate effect which derive from extra-aesthetic spheres, and who does not feel himself raised above the pathological-moral process, can now only despair of his own aesthetic nature; against which we would recommend, as a harmless substitute, the interpretation of Shakespeare after the manner of Gervinus and the assiduous search for ‘poetic justice.’ (BT 22)

In his two volume study of Shakespeare, Gervinus argues for Shakespeare’s “splendid moral grandeur,” adding that Shakespeare’s “works have been often called a secular bible.” For Gervinus, “Shakespeare’s poetry is moral, his poetic impulse therefore is inseparably interwoven with his ethic feelings…he absorbed himself more of the moral element of life, than any other has done.” Nietzsche raises the example of Gervinus in the midst of his discussion of the Aristotelean interpretation of tragedy. Nietzsche argues: “Since the time of Aristotle, no one has yet given an explanation of the effect of tragedy which would permit the conclusion that artistic states were involved, or that the audience was engaged in aesthetic activity” (BT 22).

---

39 Nietzsche’s critique of Gervinus is continued in *Untimely Meditations*: “All this is certainly new and striking, even if it does not strike us very pleasantly; and, as surely as it is new, just as surely it will never grow old, for it was never young: it came into the world already old. What ideas the new-style blessed come across in their aesthetic Heaven! And why have they not forgotten at any rate some of them, especially when they are as unaesthetic and earthly-ephemeral and bear the stamp of stupidity as visibly as, for example, some of the opinions of Gervinus!” (UM, Strauss, 4).


41 Gervinus, *Shakespeare Commentaries*, vol. 1, 2.


43 Nietzsche’s disagreement with the Aristotelian theory of catharsis continues in his late writings. See, for example, HH 212: “Old doubts over the effect of art.—Are fear and pity really discharged by tragedy, as Aristotle has it, so that the auditor goes home colder and more placid? Do ghost stories make one less fearful and superstitious? It is true in the case of certain physical events, the enjoyment of love for example,
discharges pity and fear in the spectator—is problematic to Nietzsche because its explanation of the benefits of tragedy have nothing to do with art itself, but only of the side effect that art can provide. Similarly, moralistic interpretations overlook any aesthetic dimension of meaning in tragedy, focusing only on the moral benefit conveyed—as an example Nietzsche cites Schiller’s theory of tragedy in which the spectator “feels elevated and inspired by the victory of good and noble principles when we see the hero being sacrificed in the name of a moral view of the world” (BT 22). As an alternative, Nietzsche suggests that we should interpret tragedy “as being no more than aesthetic play [ein aesthetisches Spiel] after all” (BT 22). According to Nietzsche, the art of Shakespeare should not be understood in moralistic, but in artistic terms.\(^{44}\)

The irreligiosity of Shakespeare gives us a clue as to how great art should function in the wake of Christian morality. In modernity, where our drives have been

---

\(^{44}\) Nietzsche argues that Shakespeare’s poems, in addition to his tragedies, also exhibit a rejection of Christian morality: “The passions become evil and malicious if they are regarded as evil and malicious. Thus Christianity has succeeded in transforming Eros and Aphrodite—great powers capable of idealisation—into diabolical kobolds and phantoms by means of the torments it introduces into the consciences of believers whenever they are excited sexually. Is it not dreadful to make necessary and regularly recurring sensations into a source of inner misery, and in this way to want to make inner misery a necessary and regularly recurring phenomenon in every human being! In addition to which it remains a misery kept secret and thus more deeply rooted: for not everyone possesses the courage of Shakespeare to confess his Christian gloominess on this point in the way he did in his Sonnets” (D 76).
saturated by the mores of Christianity, an important function of great art is to get us to the point where we can begin to see that Christian morality is not the only option and, as a result, to allow our drives to begin to return to their natural state. For Nietzsche, Shakespeare is just this kind of great artist.

V. Shakespeare as the Poet of Tragic Knowledge

We can now return to the question of whether or not Nietzsche thinks it is possible for art to provide life affirmation in modernity. Sebastian Gardner argues that the affirming power of tragedy declines in Nietzsche’s mature writings. He states:

*The Birth of Tragedy* raises up tragedy against a cultural and spiritual condition of which (Christian) morality is a central component, but tragedy clashes with morality only in so far as (Christian) morality is a part of the general modern condition which tragic consciousness opposes. Later, when morality has become for Nietzsche the root cause of the modern life-tendency, he no longer regards tragedy as an adequate alternative to morality. Thus Nietzsche valorizes tragedy at an early point, when he does not see morality as a special, fundamental problem; and at the later point when he does see morality as such a problem, his estimate of the curative power of tragedy has declined.45

On Gardner’s account, Nietzsche’s changing views on the affirming nature of tragedy are linked to his evolving level of concern with Christian morality. While, he argues, Nietzsche’s concern with Christian morality is present in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is not the central focus of the book. Only when the problems of Christian morality become Nietzsche’s primary target does his faith in the affirming power of tragedy diminish.

I take issue with Gardner’s reading on two fronts. First, as I argued in Chapter Three, Nietzsche’s changing attitudes about the curative power of tragedy are a result of the historical nature of his thinking. The late Nietzsche does not change his mind about the ability of tragedy to affirm in ancient Greece and does not foreclose the possibility for the right cultural conditions to occur where tragedy (or other forms of art) might be capable of providing a healthy form of life affirmation. Instead, his thoughts on the affirming powers of art change as a result of the different cultural conditions that exist in ancient Greece and in modernity. Nietzsche is concerned about the ability of art to affirm life in modernity because he thinks that the majority of modern art has been corrupted with the forces of Christian morality and because those effected by Christian morality are not capable of finding affirmation through art in the same way as the ancient Greeks. While Nietzsche does change his views about the affirming powers of tragedy in modernity after *The Birth of Tragedy*, he does not ultimately change his mind about the ability of ancient Greek tragedy to affirm life. Rather, what he has changed his mind about is the ability of our modern culture to be able to affirm life as the Greeks did.

Second, while I agree with Gardner’s assessment that Nietzsche’s faith in the *curative* power of tragedy declines in his late writings, I want to argue that, in some sense, his faith in the *affirming* ability of tragedy remains. While he does argue that ancient Greek tragedy cannot function for moderns in the same way it did for the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche still maintains a place for the affirming power of tragedy in his mature writings. We can understand this by looking at what Nietzsche says about Shakespeare.
On my reading, a paradigm of modern tragedy is present as early as *The Birth of Tragedy*, but becomes fully developed in Nietzsche’s later writings. A mature theory of modern tragedy can be reconstructed out of Nietzsche’s early comments on Shakespearian tragedy, which appears as an alternative to ancient Greek tragedy or Wagnerian opera. In his early notebooks, Nietzsche identifies Shakespeare as a “poet of tragic knowledge (der Dichter der tragischen Erkenntniß)” (WEN 7 [130]). “Tragic knowledge” is a term Nietzsche uses to describe the development of art after the demise of tragedy:

> Euripides and Socrates signify a new beginning in the development of art: out of tragic knowledge (der tragischen Erkenntniß). This is the task of the future, which so far only Shakespeare and our music have completely appropriated. In this sense Greek tragedy is only a preparation: a yearning serenity. (WEN 7 [166])

Here, Nietzsche makes it clear that tragic knowledge emerges after the death of Greek tragedy. This is evident from Nietzsche’s association of tragic knowledge with Euripides and Socrates, who, Nietzsche argues, took the place of tragedy after its demise. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Euripides and Socrates signal a move away from the tragedy and mythology of ancient Greece, towards a view of the world that is characterized by a faith in science, logic, and reason.46 Tragic knowledge, then, is a fundamentally new paradigm of art, a “task of the future” to be taken up by artists like Shakespeare. Nietzsche’s thinking about art here is historical. After the death of tragedy, a new type of art arises

---

46 Nietzsche describes Socratism as follows: “what I understand by the spirit of science is the belief, which first came to light in the person of Socrates, that the depths of nature can be fathomed and that knowledge can heal all ills” (BT 17).
out of tragic knowledge, which, I will argue, can be seen as a grounding for Nietzsche’s mature thinking on modern art.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche refines his understanding of “tragic knowledge,” describing it as an insight that appears not merely after the downfall of tragedy, but when tragedy’s replacement, Socratism, comes to realize its own limits.

At present, however, science, spurred on by its powerful delusion, is hurrying unstoppably to its limits, where the optimism hidden in the essence of logic will founder and break up. For there is an infinite number of points on the periphery of the circle of science, and while we have no way of foreseeing how the circle could ever be completed, a noble and gifted man inevitably encounters, before the mid-point of his existence, boundary points on the periphery like this, where he stares into that which cannot be illuminated. When, to his horror, he sees how logic curls up around itself at these limits and finally bites its own tail, then a new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic knowledge* [*die tragische Erkenntnis*], which, simply to be endured, needs art for protection and as medicine. (BT 15)

According to Nietzsche, the Socratic love of logic and science eventually runs its course and a new type of knowledge, tragic knowledge, takes hold. He argues that it is a result of the “insatiable greed of optimistic knowledge, of which Socrates appeared to be the exemplar, turning suddenly into tragic resignation and a need for art” (BT 15). When Socratism becomes clear about its own limitations, it loses its power to provide meaning.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is interested in tragic knowledge because, for him, it marks the moment when the rebirth of the spirit of tragedy becomes a live option. On his account, once the limits of Socratic culture are made evident, a space will be made for the rebirth of tragic culture. Nietzsche, in this early work, is ultimately hopeful that the spirit of tragedy is on the verge of being reborn, arguing that “The time of Socratic
man is past” (BT 20). He lauds the work of Kant and Schopenhauer for uncovering the limits of Socratic optimism:

Meanwhile great natures with a bent for general problems have applied the tools of science itself, with incredible deliberation, to prove that all understanding, by its very nature, is limited and conditional, thereby rejecting decisively the claim of science to universal validity and universal goals. Thanks to this demonstration it has been recognized for the first time that it is an arrogant delusion to believe that we can penetrate to the innermost essence of things by following the chain of causality. The hardest-fought victory of all was won by the enormous courage and wisdom of Kant and Schopenhauer, a victory over the optimism which lies hidden in the nature of logic and which in turn is the hidden foundation of our culture. (BT 18)

Nietzsche argues that “Kant showed that these things [eternal truths and unconditional laws with universal validity] actually only served to raise mere appearance, the work of maya, to the status of the sole and supreme reality and to put this in the place of the innermost and true essence of things, thereby making it impossible really to understand this essence” (BT 18). Believing that Socratic optimism is no longer viable in modernity, Nietzsche exclaims that tragic knowledge is on the verge of breaking through, that a new, tragic culture is about to emerge: “This insight marks the beginning of a culture which I now dare to describe as a tragic culture” (BT 18). The symbol that

---

47 Nietzsche reiterates Kant and Schopenhauer’s role in exposing the limits of science in *Untimely Meditations*, where he invokes the examples of Hamlet: “To understand the picture one must divine the painter—that Schopenhauer knew. Nowadays, however, the whole guild of the sciences is occupied in understanding the canvas and the paint but not the picture; one can say, indeed, that only he who has a clear view of the picture of life and existence as a whole can employ the individual sciences without harm to himself, for without such a regulatory total picture they are threads that nowhere come to an end and only render our life more confused and labyrinthine. Schopenhauer is, as I said, great in that he pursues this picture as Hamlet pursues the ghost, without letting himself be led aside, as scholars are, or becoming enmeshed in abstract scholasticism, as is the fate of rabid dialecticians” (UM Schopenhauer 3).
Nietzsche proposes for this new cultural form is “that of the music-making Socrates” (BT 17).

Shakespeare, who Nietzsche describes as a “poet of tragic knowledge,” can be seen as a candidate for Nietzsche’s early hopes for the rebirth of tragedy. The textual evidence for this candidacy is enhanced by Nietzsche’s comment, which I discussed earlier, that Shakespeare is a “Socrates who makes music”:

Euripides on the path of science seeks the tragic idea, in order to attain the effect of the dithyramb through words.

Shakespeare, the poet of fulfillment, he brings Sophocles to perfection, he is the Socrates who makes music” (WEN 7[131])

In Nietzsche’s early notebooks, Shakespeare can be seen as a combination of both Sophoclean and Socratic elements. In this sense, Shakespeare, the “poet of tragic knowledge,” combines Sophocles, the height of ancient Greek tragedy, with Socrates, who represents the death of Greek tragedy and a move towards a faith in scientism that has endured through modernity. This combination of the Sophoclean and the Socratic as the future of art is not limited to Nietzsche’s early notebooks, but also appears in The Birth of Tragedy:

Let us recall, then, how Kant and Schopenhauer made it possible for the spirit of German philosophy, which springs from similar sources, to destroy scientific Socratism’s contented pleasure in existence by demonstrating its limits, and how this demonstration ushered in an incomparably deeper and more serious consideration of ethical questions and art, one which can be defined as the conceptual formulation of Dionysiac wisdom. In what direction does this mysterious unity of German music and German philosophy point, if not towards a new form of existence, the content of which can only be guessed at from Hellenic analogies? (BT 19)
Just as Nietzsche describes Shakespeare and his works as a union of the Socratic spirit of Euripides and the tragic spirit of Sophocles in the notebooks, he describes the future of art as the union of German music and philosophy in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This demonstrates that some aspects of Nietzsche’s hopes for Shakespeare as a new paradigm of art make it out of his notebooks and into the published version of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Despite this textual evidence, a problem arises for our interpretation of Shakespeare as a candidate for the rebirth of the tragic spirit in modernity. Talk of Shakespeare nearly disappears in *The Birth of Tragedy*, (with the exception of a few mentions throughout the text). More troublingly, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche pins his hopes for the rebirth of a tragic age on the spirit of music.\(^{48}\) Citing Wagner’s writings on music in his “Beethoven” essay and Schopenhauer’s theory of music in *World as Will and Representation* as support, Nietzsche argues that “music is able to give birth to myth, i.e. to the most significant example, and in particular to tragic myth, myth which speaks of Dionysiac knowledge in symbols” (BT 16). Shakespeare, as an artist whose dramas lack an explicitly musical element, seems to be an unlikely candidate for the future of great art.

In spite of this interpretive difficulty, Nietzsche’s sustained interest in Shakespeare as an exemplar of a great man and a great artist give us good reason to take

\(^{48}\) See BT 16: “it is certain that tragedy perishes with the disappearance of the spirit of music, and it is just as certain that this spirit alone can give birth to tragedy.”
Nietzsche’s early interest in the author seriously. Given Nietzsche’s break with Wagner, we are left to muse what role Shakespeare (and music) might have played without Wagner’s overwhelming influence. This leaves open the question, too, of how much of Nietzsche’s interest in Schopenhauer, who believed that music was our best hope for providing a temporary respite from the suffering inflicted by the will, was influenced by Wagner’s own musical pursuits.\textsuperscript{49} Answering these questions is impossible. But what we can do is examine the extent to which Nietzsche’s early hopes for Shakespeare as a poet of tragic knowledge are taken up in Nietzsche’s mature writings.

There are two elements of continuity that I want to stress between Nietzsche’s early and late writings on Shakespeare. First, as I demonstrated in the previous section, are his comments on the irreligiosity of Shakespeare as an individual and an artist. Nietzsche praises Shakespeare for being capable of creating characters like Brutus and Caesar, who resist the bounds of Christian morality. Second is his characterization of Shakespeare as an exemplar of human greatness, which, as I will demonstrate, begins as early as his notebooks of 1871. As I noted in Section Two, Nietzsche views Shakespeare as an exemplar of the highest man. In his early notebooks, Nietzsche describes the “future hero of tragic knowledge" in similar ways to the great individuals of his late writings:

I have no more fervent wish than to meet a man to whom I would be unable to address this speech, a man of angry majesty, of the proudest gaze, of the boldest will, a fighter, a poet and a philosopher at one and the same time, striding as if he had to stride over snakes and monsters. On the brow of this future hero of tragic knowledge (\textit{der tragischen Erkenntnist}) will lie the reflection of that Greek serenity, the halo inaugurating the still

awaited rebirth of antiquity, the German rebirth of the Hellenic world… Neither the state nor the people nor mankind exist for their own sake; the goal lies in their peaks, in the great ‘individuals’, the saints and artists. (WEN 11[1])

Here, the hero of tragic knowledge is an individual who, like Shakespeare, is capable of being many things at once: “a man of angry majesty, of the proudest gaze, of the boldest will, a fighter, a poet and a philosopher at one and the same time.” Nietzsche’s early hopes for the rebirth of tragedy lie with great individuals who have the ability to fight against the overwhelming forces of Socratism. Nietzsche’s early disdain for Socratism is, I argue, an early form of his concerns about the pervasiveness of Christian-morality, which ultimately leads to the same faith in logic and truth to provide absolute meaning for our lives.50 For the mature Nietzsche, along with a faith in Christianity came a faith in reason, which was developed and nurtured. Just like in Socratism, the desire for truth that is fostered in Christian morality results in uncovering the fact “that there is no truth, that there is no absolute nature of things nor a ‘thing-in-itself’” (WP 325). In his early and his late works, Nietzsche maintains a theory of great individuals as those who are capable of affirming life in the face of a life-denying world view, be it Socratism or Christianity.

These similarities between Nietzsche’s early and late views on Shakespeare are useful in understanding how art can remain life affirming. As a poet of tragic knowledge, Shakespeare has a unique perspective, one that understands the limitations of the Socratic or Christian-moral worldview. This phenomenon is analogous to the European nihilism I

50 See Chapter One, where I argue that the mature Nietzsche identifies the Christian-moral drive toward truth as the undoing of the Christian-moral worldview.
described in Chapter One. European nihilism occurs when, in the midst of a culture dominated by Christian morality, one realizes that their previously held values are not beyond questioning. It is a condition that comes about after our belief in an extrahuman source of value—be it a god, truth, or a system of morality—has run its course and is no longer sufficient to provide existential meaning and sustenance. This nihilistic insight brings with it a new level of awareness of the limitations of Christian-morality. As I argued in Chapter One, Nietzsche’s description of the downfall of Socratism in *The Birth of Tragedy* is analogous to his description of European nihilism in his later writings. In both cases, the extant framework of meaning is shown to be faulty and is abandoned. What is relevant for our discussion here is that, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche calls the insight that comes from the breakdown of the Soctratic world view “tragic knowledge.” While Nietzsche may name this phenomena “nihilism” in his late writings, in his early writings, he views it as a positive development. It opens the door for a new, improved, more life-affirming framework of meaning to develop.51

---

51 This brings out a key way that Nietzsche’s view on life affirmation changes throughout his writings. While the early Nietzsche is hopeful that the time of Socratic man is past and that a new culture based on tragic knowledge is set to emerge, the late Nietzsche is not convinced that the thrall of Christianity is over:

> A tremendous hope is speaking from out of this essay. Ultimately, I have no reason to take back my hope that music will have a Dionysian future. Let us look forward a century and assume that I have succeeded in my attempts to assassinate two thousand years of anti-nature and desecration of humanity. The new faction in favour of life that takes on the greatest task of all, that of breeding humanity to higher levels (which includes the ruthless extermination of everything degenerate and parasitical), will make possible a surplus of life on earth that will necessarily regenerate the Dionysian state. I promise a tragic age: tragedy, the highest art of saying yes to life, will be reborn when humanity has moved beyond consciousness of the harshest though most necessary wars without suffering from it. (TI “Birth” 4)

The late Nietzsche does not ultimately abandon the hope for the rebirth of a tragic age. Yet he is not convinced, as his early self was, that his nineteenth-century Germany is yet ready to cast off the shackles of slave morality. Instead, his hopes for the rebirth of a tragic age are confined to the future, when “humanity
As the “poet of tragic knowledge,” Shakespeare is an artist capable of harnessing this realization in his artwork. Shakespeare’s tragedies, which serve as an example of successful tragedy in the modern age, can be understood as expressing an insight that allows us to see the flaws in the predominant Christian-moral world view. As a poet of tragic knowledge, Shakespeare is capable of communicating through art the boundaries and limitations of the Socratic (and, projecting Nietzsche’s theory into his late writings, Christian moral) viewpoint. This new form of art brings to light the fact that our drives have been dominated by slave morality and are no longer capable of flowing freely within the individual. Christian morality would never condone Brutus overthrowing Caesar just because he threatened his freedom. But Shakespeare’s artworks provide us with a different way of viewing Brutus’ actions.

Thus, contra Gardner, Nietzsche should not be seen as abandoning the possibility for tragedy to affirm life in modernity. While modern tragedy does not affirm in the same way as ancient Greek tragedy, this does not mean that tragedy has lost all of its life-affirming potential. Instead, great artists like Shakespeare, who recognize the limitations of the Christian-moral world view, are capable of portraying a resistance to morality in their works.52 This resistance to Christian morality is, admittedly, only a first step on the

52 Janaway argues that Nietzsche’s style functions in a similar way, by disrupting our adherence to the norms of Christian-morality. He provides an illuminating account of how this disruption would affect one’s drives:

Nietzsche’s persuasive process consists, very roughly, of showing up a variety of psychological origins for our judgments, inducing many ambivalent and self-critical feelings, shocking, embarrassing, and wooing us in any and every way that may help detach us from our confidence in our assumed values, and inviting us into a space where each of us can, if we are the right kind of
path to a full-fledged version of mature, Nietzschean life affirmation. A full-fledged affirmation of life, according to Nietzsche’s mature philosophy, requires a direct confrontation and acceptance of suffering, a willingness to affirm life in all of its aspects, to love our fate. However, it is an essential step, without which one could not escape from the yolk of Christian morality. While tragedy, or art in general, is not the only way to take this first step, it is important to note that Nietzsche’s interest in art as a life-affirming modality does not disappear completely in his late writings. Indeed, using Nietzsche’s own tactics in *The Birth of Tragedy*, of selecting a particular form of art and analyzing its life-affirming capacities, has demonstrated, through an analysis of Shakespearean tragedy, that modern art retains at least a modicum of its life affirming capacity.

VI. Conclusion

On my reading, Nietzsche’s thinking about Shakespeare and his tragedies are a useful starting point for an investigation of the possibility of affirming art in modernity. Focusing on Shakespeare in this way allows us to identify a historical movement in

person to be affected by and of the foregoing, use feelings and reflections as yet unknown to us to explore whether there might not be other, healthier evaluative attitudes for us to adhere to. Nietzsche seeks to activate dispositions to affective response that manage to co-exist in us alongside those fostered by morality…These reactions, if we have them, intimate that there is more to us than the shape that morality moulds us into: other drives co-exist with those that morality nourishes, and can be provoked into action (“Morality, Drives, and Human Greatness,” 199).

This is relevant to our discussion of the way Shakespeare affirms life because Nietzsche sees himself as a kindred spirit to Shakespeare. They both work against the mores of slave morality: “Great poets create only from their own reality—to the point where they cannot stand their work any more afterwards … Whenever I glance through my *Zarathustra*, I walk around the room for half an hour, sobbing uncontrollably” (EH “Why I am So Clever” 4).
Nietzsche’s thinking about tragedy. While it is often thought that the mature Nietzsche abandons his early interest in tragedy as a means of affirmation, his writings on Shakespeare demonstrate that tragedy can still take on an affirmative role. Shakespeare’s tragedies provide the spectator with a host of experiences, predicaments, and choices that challenge the prevailing moral world view. If an individual is capable of interpreting Shakespeare in the right way, he will not view Hamlet, as Gervinus does, as a “truth-loving moral hero” who “[stands in the midst of those who wander on none but crooked ways in hypocrisy, dissimulation and untruths],”53 but, as I explore in the next chapter, as an individual who is exceptional precisely because he has realized that his previous framework of meaning no longer holds meaning for him.

---

CHAPTER FIVE
ET TU HAMLET?: NIETZSCHEAN REVALUATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE

A puzzle remains about Nietzsche’s thinking on Shakespeare, modern art, and affirmation. While it is clear that Nietzsche praises Shakespeare as an artist capable of going against the grain of Christian morality, we do not yet have an account of any of his thoughts on the plays themselves. In this chapter, I remedy this problem by looking closely at Nietzsche’s views on Hamlet. I approach this problem by looking at two different ways that Nietzsche’s estimation of Hamlet is puzzling. The first puzzle is limited to Nietzsche’s discussion of Hamlet within The Birth of Tragedy, in which Nietzsche briefly touches on the play. The second examines the way that Nietzsche’s evaluation of Hamlet evolves in his mature writings.

I begin by focusing on a passage from The Birth of Tragedy in which Nietzsche uses Hamlet as an example of a Dionysian man. This passage is interesting because of its apparent lack of fit within its context. Hamlet, an Elizabethan, English play without a chorus, appears during Nietzsche’s discussion of ancient Greek tragedy, its chorus, and its effect on its audience. I explore the puzzling nature of this passage, review a popular misreading, and suggest a new approach that illustrates how this Hamlet passage can illuminate Nietzsche’s notion of life affirmation in The Birth of Tragedy. I continue by examining the way that Nietzsche’s views on Hamlet change in his mature writings. Nietzsche’s assessments of Hamlet in his mature period are ambiguous. In The Gay Science (1882) and Beyond Good and Evil (1886), Nietzsche is critical of Hamlet’s melancholy and meek nature, focusing instead on the courage of Brutus and Julius

140
Caesar. In these writings, Hamlet is decidedly not a candidate for human greatness.

However, in *Ecce Homo* (October/November 1888) and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (December 1888), Nietzsche’s estimation of *Hamlet* changes again. He becomes a paradigm for a great, life-affirming individual. I explore the ramifications this change in Nietzsche’s evaluation of Hamlet has for his theory of life affirmation.

I. Hamlet as Dionysian Man

One of Nietzsche’s longest meditations on *Hamlet* appears in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In this text, Nietzsche’s allusion to *Hamlet* appears during his discussion of the origins of the tragic chorus. According to Nietzsche, “tragedy arose from the tragic chorus and was originally chorus and nothing but chorus” (BT 7). For Nietzsche, the chorus is important not only because it marks the beginning of tragedy, but also because it is what allows the audience of tragedy to affirm life—to find life worth living in the face of the horrors depicted in tragedy. In the context of this discussion, with its focus on ancient tragedy, Nietzsche’s example of *Hamlet* seems to come out of nowhere:¹

In this sense Dionysiac man is similar to 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

¹ Nietzsche’s reference to *Hamlet* is puzzling particularly if one lacks knowledge of the discussion about Shakespeare at the time. However, knowledge about the reception of Shakespeare in Germany makes Nietzsche’s allusion to *Hamlet* much less surprising. Just prior to Nietzsche’s reference to *Hamlet*, Nietzsche is discussing A. W. Schlegel’s notion of the ideal spectator. Schlegel’s translation of Shakespeare’s works was and still is considered a standard translation. Shakespeare was often a topic of discussion in Schlegel’s own essays. For an account of A.W. Schlegel’s relationship with Shakespeare see: Christine Roger and Roger Paulin, “August Wilhelm Schlegel,” in *Voltaire, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge: Great Shakespearians: Volume III*, ed. Roger Paulin (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).
things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion—this is the lesson of Hamlet, not a cheap wisdom about Jack the Dreamer who does not get around to acting because he reflects too much, out of an excess of possibilities, as it were. No, it is not reflection, it is true knowledge, insight into a terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action, both in the case of Hamlet and in that of Dionysiac man. (BT 7)

Nietzsche’s reference to *Hamlet* is puzzling on several grounds. First, *Hamlet* lacks any choral elements. Second *Hamlet* is not an ancient Greek, but a seventeenth-century English tragedy. Third, and more importantly, Nietzsche associates Hamlet’s lethargy, inaction, and life-denial with Dionysus—Hamlet is a “Dionysiac man.” This is perplexing because, as I argued in Chapter One, Nietzsche characterizes the Dionysian as “mystical,” “jubilant,” “exuberant,” and full of “delight” (BT 16, 17, 24). On Nietzsche’s account, connecting with the Dionysian is not a painful but a “blissful” experience (BT 1).

There is an overall lack of consensus in the literature about the meaning of the *Hamlet* passage in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In most cases, these readings refer to the *Hamlet* passage in passing and do not pause to ask how it fits within Nietzsche’s text. Some commentators—including Bernard Reginster and Julian Young—see the passage as expressing a form of Schopenhauerian pessimism. Reginster argues that “this short summary [the *Hamlet* passage] alludes to Schopenhauer’s view that suffering is an

---

essential, and therefore a necessary, feature of life.”3 For Reginster, the lethargy experienced by Dionysian man, which makes him similar to Hamlet, is the result of suffering, which, for Schopenhauer “is the experience of resistance to the satisfaction of our desires.”4 Reginster continues: “his [Schopenhauer’s] demonstration of its [suffering’s] inevitability implies the impossibility of fulfillment, a condition in which nothing is left to be desired. This, in turn, accounts for the inhibition of action.”5

Reginster’s reading only tells one side of the story. In order to get a more complete picture, we can turn to Nehamas. Nehamas argues that, throughout the entirety of his corpus, Nietzsche is interested in “self-reflexive situations,” “mechanisms that promote what they deny.”6 Nehamas uses Nietzsche’s allusion to Hamlet as an example of one of these mechanisms. For Nehamas, the functioning of tragedy is itself self-reflexive: “Too much (‘Dionysian’) insight into the reality of life leads to despair and inaction: ‘Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet’ (BT, 7).”7 Nehamas, though, carries on: “juxtaposed with this most powerful representation of the vanity of all effort is the tragic chorus,” which assures its spectators that “the realization that one is a part of everything that lives makes life ‘indestructibly

5 Reginster, “Art and Affirmation,” 15.
6 Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 119. Nehamas claims that Nietzsche was always interested in the paradox that is posed by (seemingly) anti-natural phenomena, i.e., practices, norms, values, etc. that seem to contradict the purposes of nature. In the Genealogy, it is asceticism, while in The Birth of Tragedy, it is tragedy.
7 Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature, 119.
powerful and pleasurable’ and therefore worth living after all.”

In short, “Tragedy apparently discourages all effort, but actually promotes it.”

In his passing reference to *Hamlet* and *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nehamas makes an important point: we should not understand the *Hamlet* passage merely as evidence of Nietzsche’s adoption of Schopenhauer’s pessimism. After all, as I have already argued in Chapters One and Two, Nietzsche adopts neither Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, nor his pessimism. Instead, we must view it as tied up with Nietzsche’s puzzling account of life affirmation through tragedy. While tragedy would seem to do the opposite, it allows us to affirm life.

When taken out of context, the *Hamlet* passage may merely seem to be, as Reginster suggests, an expression of the view that suffering is an essential and necessary part of life. However, if we look at what comes just prior to the *Hamlet* example, we can see that Nietzsche is making a more complicated point—one that is of relevance to our understanding of the tragic audience and the tragic chorus:

The Hellene, by nature profound and uniquely capable of the most exquisite and most severe suffering, comforts himself with this chorus, for he has gazed with keen eye into the midst of the fearful, destructive havoc of so-called world history, and has seen the cruelty of nature, and is in danger of longing to deny the will as the Buddhist does. Art saves him, and through art life saves him—for itself.

The reason for this is that the ecstasy of the Dionysiac state, in which the usual barriers and limits of existence are destroyed, contains, for as long as it lasts, a *lethargic* element in which all personal experiences from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience. But as soon as daily reality re-

---

8 Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 119.

enters consciousness, it is experienced as such with a sense of revulsion. (BT 7)

The *Hamlet* passage may express the insight that life is inevitably filled with suffering, but this suffering is not the primary cause of the Dionysian man’s inaction. Instead, his inaction is a complex reaction to the ecstasy of the Dionysian state. Understanding this complex reaction is important because Nietzsche uses Hamlet as an analog for the experience of the tragic audience. As I argued in Chapter Two, the first effect of Dionysian tragedy is that “state and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature” (BT 7). The lethargy of the Dionysian man, and by extension an audience who experiences this first effect of tragedy, is a reaction to the difference between the everyday world, which is filled with suffering, and the Dionysian, which is filled with an ecstatic unity. Our everyday world pales in comparison to the joy of the Dionysian state—knowing that such a state exists causes lethargy because it makes us realize that there is something better than the world we endure every day. Once we leave the Dionysian state, we are met with a sense of revulsion. This revulsion is why, like Hamlet, the Dionysian man finds action repulsive. His Dionysian experience puts into relief the fact that the world is arbitrary and cruel, rife with suffering. As Nietzsche says: “Once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now he understands the symbolism of
Ophelia’s fate, now he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion” (BT 7).\(^\text{10}\)

This can explain the apparent contradiction in Nietzsche’s comments about Hamlet as a Dionysian man. While Nietzsche describes Hamlet in terms of life denial—of lethargy and inaction—he also describes Hamlet as Dionysian. This makes it seem as if Nietzsche is also associating the experience of the Dionysian with a life-negating result. But, this is not actually the case. Hamlet’s aversion to action is not merely a result of a pure Dionysian experience, which is an experience of joy and unity with nature. Instead, Hamlet’s reticence to act is a result of returning to his everyday existence after experiencing a blissful union with the Dionysian.

Essential for Nietzsche’s view, however, is that tragedy does not leave its audience in a state of revulsion or life denial. Rather, the audience also experiences tragedy’s life affirming effects—of being able to see life as worth living in spite of its suffering. In the Hamlet passage, Nietzsche is providing a hypothetical example of this first effect of Dionysian tragedy, of what it would be like if tragedy did not ultimately provide us with an affirmation and thereby also a justification of life. We could speculate that, as the Dionysian man, Hamlet is an analogy for a tragic audience who has

\(\text{\footnotesize 10 In section 3 of The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche introduces the myth of Silenus, a companion of Dionysius. As his captor, King Midas asks Silenus “what is the best and most excellent thing for human beings.” Silenus responds “Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you not to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for your is: to die soon.”} \)
experienced only the first effect of tragedy, and thus been left in a state of revulsion, without affirmation.

Despite seeming to present a contradiction—that the *Hamlet* passage only tells one side of the story, that of life denial, not life affirmation—Nietzsche’s *Hamlet* example is actually, as Nehamas suggests, an instance of a type of mechanism that promotes what it denies. Nietzsche’s allusion to *Hamlet* is not merely an example of Schopenhauerian pessimism, but is a key example for understanding life affirmation as it appears in *The Birth of Tragedy*. While the *Hamlet* passage, at first, may appear to be asserting that the effects of tragedy are to leave us in a state like that of Hamlet, one of lethargy and inaction, a closer reading reveals that Nietzsche’s *Hamlet* example is merely a *hypothetical* account of what *would* happen if the tragic chorus did not provide its audience with metaphysical solace through the power of art. By paying attention to the context in which Nietzsche discusses the *Hamlet* passage, we thus see that it is, ultimately, an account of the first effect of tragedy, which is always accompanied by its later, life affirming-effect.

II. A Nietzschean Reading of *Hamlet*

In Chapter Two, I argued that tragedy affirms by enabling the spectator to develop a new, artistic perspective. This artistic perspective, which is achieved through the union of the Apolline and Dionysian, is what ultimately lifts the spectator out of the lethargic, life-denying disposition that is caused by his initial confrontation with the Dionysian chorus. In line with this, I want to suggest a further reason for viewing Nietzsche’s
Hamlet example as helpful for understanding life affirmation in The Birth of Tragedy.

While Nietzsche’s Hamlet example seems to provide us with only one side of the story—of how Hamlet fails to act, of lethargy, of the Dionysian without the saving graces of art—I want to suggest that that we can understand Nietzsche’s notion of life affirmation by looking closely at the plot of Hamlet itself. The play-within-a-play in Act 3, Scene 2 is a concrete example of how art allows Hamlet to finally act, and in a way, affirm his own life. For Nietzsche, we are able to affirm life through art: “for only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified” (BT 5). On Nietzsche’s account, tragedy affirms the spectator through creative, artistic activity, which enables him to take on the perspective of the Heraclitean child. This artistic perspective can save us from feelings of revulsion. And in the case of Hamlet, it literally does.

In the beginning of the play, Hamlet is plagued with inaction. After being visited by what appears to be the ghost of his father and learning of his father’s death at the hands of his uncle, and now step-father, Claudius, Hamlet struggles with the ghost’s command to take revenge. Throughout the play, Hamlet repeatedly fails to act. On a Nietzschean reading, this failure of action is not the result of too much reflection, but of having too much knowledge—knowledge that makes one realize that individual actions are futile.\(^{11}\) Hamlet’s impotence in the face of his circumstances is caused by his

---

\(^{11}\) Nietzsche’s interpretation of Hamlet may appear unusual. For example, Hegel’s interpretation of Hamlet conflicts with Nietzsche’s. Unlike Nietzsche, Hegel sees Hamlet’s plight not as the result of too much knowledge, but as the result of spending too much time procrastinating on the knowledge that he already has (G.W. F. Hegel, Lectures on Fine Art, trans. T. M. Knox [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], 231). Nietzsche, however, is not alone. Literary critic Harold Bloom argues that “Nietzsche memorably got Hamlet right, seeing him not as the man who thinks too much but rather as the man who thinks too well” (Harold Bloom, Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human [New York: Riverhead, 1998], 393). Though, it
knowledge that the world is arbitrary and cruel. His world, after all, has just been turned upside down. His mother is married to his uncle. His father, a ghost, seeks revenge.

It is only as an artist that Hamlet comes to act. His first action in avenging his father is to stage a play, which reenacts his father’s death as explained by the ghost, as a test for his uncle Claudius. In this play, Hamlet takes on the role of a dramaturge. He not only composes, but also directs the speech of the players and their movements, instructing them to “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue” and to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action.” It is only through an act of artistic creation that Hamlet can begin to avenge his father. By transforming his knowledge of what the ghost told him into an actual, artistic form, Hamlet is able to detach himself from his lethargic disposition.

In this sense, Hamlet finds himself in a position that seems quite different from a spectator of ancient Greek tragedy. He is both the creator and spectator of his play. And, to some extent, he is also an actor. During the play, Hamlet interjects so much that Ophelia comments “You are as good as a chorus, my Lord.” On a Nietzschean reading, Hamlet is a Dionysian man not just when he is in a lethargic state, finding it laughable that he should “be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint” (BT 7), but also when

must be noted that Bloom changed his mind about Nietzsche’s interpretation of Shakespeare in Hamlet: Poem Unlimited (New York: Riverhead, 2003), 96.


he comes to act as an artist. Hamlet, then, demonstrates both action and inaction, he is the chorus and the audience, the director and the actor. He has become what Nietzsche calls a genius, a true artist, who, during an act of artistic creation, temporarily merges with the “original artist of the world” and “in this condition he resembles, miraculously, that uncanny image of fairy-tale which can turn its eyes around and look at itself; now he is at one and the same time subject and object, simultaneously poet, actor, and spectator” (BT 5). In his artistic creation, Hamlet is able to fully act, to take steps towards affirming his own life in the face of his father’s murder. While at first, he is mired in revulsion, through art he becomes one with “the essential being which gives itself eternal pleasure as the creator and spectator of that comedy of art” (BT 5). As a dramaturge, Hamlet is able to take on the life-affirming perspective of artistic creator. He comes to see the world as the world’s original artist, the force that shapes the world, which Nietzsche compares to a “playing child who sets down stones here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again” (BT 24).

However, the state of artistic creator does not last for Hamlet. After the play-within-the-play, Hamlet reverts to a state of revulsion. Despite having a clear opportunity, he decides not to kill Claudius as he is praying, since that might send him to heaven. He attempts to kill Claudius in his mother’s bedchamber, but unwittingly kills Polonius instead. Indeed, Hamlet’s action at the end of the play, where he finally manages to kill Claudius, is not initiated by him, but is the result of Claudius and Laertes’ scheme to kill him. Thus, on a Nietzschean reading, Hamlet’s only true action is as an artist.
Hamlet is a character who embodies both life denial and life affirmation, providing a rich analogue for understanding the effects that tragedy has on its audience. For Nietzsche, the audience of an ancient Greek tragedy is transformed by the chorus such that they feel at one with the Dionysian and are able to feel as if they are the artists of the very tragedy they are viewing. As Nietzsche says: “Dionysiac excitement is able to transmit to an entire mass of people this artistic gift of seeing themselves surrounded by just such a crowd of spirits with which they know themselves to be inwardly at one” (BT 8, emphasis added). Thus, Hamlet is a keen metaphor for understanding the experience of the tragic audience. He not only experiences lethargy and revulsion, but also, as an artist, the joy of Dionysian creation.

III. Hamlet in the late Nietzsche

Nietzsche’s thoughts on Hamlet become even more puzzling when we look beyond The Birth of Tragedy. In his mature writings, Nietzsche’s theory of life affirmation changes focus. He is no longer primarily interested in the life-affirming power of art but, as we have seen, in great individuals who affirm life by defying the predominant, life-denying Christian-moral worldview.15 The individuals that Nietzsche

15 Nietzsche’s theory of life affirmation need not be understood only through the lens of great individuals. Bernard Reginster, for example, bases his theory of life affirmation on Nietzsche’s theory of the will to power, which, he argues, explains how it is possible to revalue suffering: to come to see it is as necessary and even desirable. See his The Affirmation of Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Others, like Andrew Huddleston, approach the topic of life affirmation through Nietzsche’s notions of eternal recurrence and amor fati. See his “Affirmation, Admirable Overvaluation, and the Eternal Recurrence,” in Nietzsche on Morality and Affirmation, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Simon May defines life affirmation with reference to justification, arguing that affirmation is genuine only when one can take “joy in one’s life’s there-ness without seeking to justify suffering as constitutive of one’s supreme goals or as otherwise essential to their attainment.” See his article, “Why
chooses as exemplars of human greatness fall, largely, into two categories: creative and artistic geniuses, including Beethoven (BGE 256) and Goethe (TI “Skirmishes” 49) and political figures like Napoleon (GM I 16), Julius Caesar (BGE 200), and Alexander the Great (TI “Wise” 4).16 Throughout his writings, Nietzsche upholds Shakespeare as an example of human greatness.17 Yet, Nietzsche’s remarks on Hamlet in his mature period are ambiguous. In The Gay Science (1882) and Beyond Good and Evil (1886) Nietzsche is critical of Hamlet’s melancholy and meek nature, focusing instead on political greatness in the Shakespearian characters of Brutus and Julius Caesar. In these writings, Hamlet is decidedly not a candidate for human greatness. Yet in Ecce Homo (October/November 1888) and Nietzsche Contra Wagner (December 1888), Nietzsche’s estimation of Hamlet changes. He becomes a paradigm for a great, life-affirming individual.

While Nietzsche’s inconsistent comments about Hamlet in his mature period are puzzling, they reveal, as I will argue, a subtle but important shift in Nietzsche’s mature theory of human greatness between his writings of 1882-1886 and his final writings of 1888. Understanding precisely what Nietzsche means by human greatness, and what type

---


17 See, for example, WP 966, EH “Why I am So Clever” 4, GS 98, D 240.
of individual would be a candidate for human greatness, is difficult because Nietzsche discusses the exemplars of such greatness in different ways. The lack of systematicity in Nietzsche’s theory has led scholars to approach the topic in various ways. One way of understanding Nietzsche’s great individual is by tracing the many different characteristics he associates with them. Brian Leiter takes this approach, identifying, to select a few as an example, the following categories: “the higher type is solitary and deals with others only instrumentally,” “The higher type seeks burdens and responsibilities, as he is driven towards the completion of a unifying project,” “The higher type is essentially healthy and resilient.” Leiter, Nietzsche on Morality, chapter 2. Patrick Hassan also takes this approach in his “Nietzsche on Human Greatness,” Journal of Value Inquiry 51 (2017): 293-310.

Others, like John Richardson, attempt to understand higher individuals by focusing on the role that the “will to power” plays in greatness. See John Richardson, Nietzsche’s System (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Christopher Janaway suggests two distinct ways of understanding human greatness: first, in terms of the attitude that he takes towards life, of maintaining a viewpoint consistent with amor fati or the eternal return and, second, through the internal constitution of an individual’s drives and instincts. What all of these interpretations have in common is that they do not distinguish between different phases of Nietzsche’s mature theory of human greatness and, instead, provide textual support from passages ranging from Human all to Human all the way through to Ecce Homo. It is not my goal to develop a systematic understanding


of Nietzsche’s theory of higher men. What I do hope to show, however, is that the current literature has missed an important progression and development in Nietzsche’s theory of human greatness and that this development can be understood clearly by looking closely at Nietzsche’s evolving interpretation of *Hamlet*.

In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche’s discussion of *Hamlet* is paired with a discussion of *Julius Caesar*:

> The most beautiful thing I can say in praise of Shakespeare *as a human being* is this: he believed in Brutus and didn’t cast a speck of suspicion on this type of virtue! … The height at which he places Caesar is the finest honour he could bestow on Brutus: only thus does he raise Brutus’ inner problem to immense proportions as well as the strength of mind that was able to cut this *knot*! And was it really political freedom that drove this poet to sympathize with Brutus—and turned him into Brutus’ accomplice? Or was political freedom only a symbolism for something inexpressible? Could it be that we confront some unknown dark event and adventure from the poet’s own soul about which he wanted to speak only in signs? What is all of Hamlet’s melancholy compared to that of Brutus! (GS 98)

Here, the greatness of Shakespeare is tied to the greatness of the characters he created. Nietzsche places his praise for Brutus, a character who carries out his decision to kill Caesar without hesitation, in direct comparison with Hamlet’s melancholic reticence to act. For the Nietzsche of *The Gay Science*, Brutus and Caesar, with their political ambitions and willingness to defy the standards of Christian morality, are the truly

---

21 An attempt to do so would be, to follow a suggestion of Andrew Huddleston, mistaken since “Nietzsche...is not a systematic thinker who argues from a single master value, or from an essentialist conception of human nature, to a view about human excellence (or anything else). What he gives us instead is a vision, which we must piece together from snippets of text, of what sorts of people and traits are especially admirable. Whether that vision persuades, or resonates, will likely depend on what values we hold, rather than on any argument Nietzsche gives for it.” Huddleston, “Nietzsche on Magnanimity, Greatness, and Greatness of Soul.”
laudable figures, exemplars of human greatness. Hamlet’s more contemplative, reflective, and reticent character pales in comparison with these great men. Just a year later, in his notebooks from 1883, Nietzsche goes even further, calling *Hamlet* a failed work (“[es ist] vor allem ein mißrathenes Werk”) (KSA 10:7[68]). In this case, his criticisms of *Hamlet* are not limited to him as a character, but to the quality of the work as a whole.

Nietzsche’s censure of Hamlet continues in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he identifies the Danish prince as a life-denying figure:

> It is generally acknowledged nowadays that no tranquilizer or sedative works better against this type of “goodwill”—a will to the actual, violent negation of life—than skepticism, the soft, sweet, soothing, poppy flower of skepticism; and even Hamlet is prescribed by physicians today as a protection against “spirit” and its underground rumblings. (BGE 208)

In this passage, Hamlet is viewed as the archetype of a skeptic, which Nietzsche describes as “the most spiritual expression of a certain complex physiological condition which in layman’s terms is called weak nerves or a sickly constitution” (BGE 208).

Nietzsche presents Hamlet as not merely life denying, but as a paradigm of life denial and morality.

However, just two years later, in *Ecce Homo* (October/November 1888) and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (December 1888), which make up his last writings before his

---

22 Later in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche finds fault with Hamlet’s misanthropy: “Misanthropy and love.—One speaks of being sick of people only when one can no longer digest them and yet still has one’s stomach full of them. Misanthropy is the result of an all-too-greedy love of man and ‘cannibalism’—but who told you to swallow men like oysters, my Prince Hamlet?” (GS 167). Nietzsche disapproves of Hamlet for being too greedy for and too reliant on the love of others. On Nietzsche’s account, Hamlet’s moody and misanthropic behavior can be understood as a result of loving others so much that he has become sick of them.
collapse, Nietzsche’s estimation of Hamlet takes a decidedly different turn. In both texts, Nietzsche describes Hamlet as having a “certainty” (Gewissheit) that provides him with a depth of understanding not available to most individuals. Nietzsche’s views about the greatness of characters like Brutus and Caesar remain constant between The Gay Science and Ecce Homo. What he does change is his opinion on Hamlet:

When I look for the highest formula for Shakespeare, the only thing I can find is the fact that he conceived the type of Caesar. You cannot guess at this sort of thing, —either you are it or you are not. Great poets create only from their own reality—to the point where they cannot stand their work any more afterwards . . . Whenever I glance through my Zarathustra, I walk around the room for half an hour, sobbing uncontrollably.—Shakespeare is the most poignant reading I know: how much suffering does it take for somebody to need to play the clown! —Have people understood Hamlet? It is not doubt, it is certainty (Gewissheit) that drives people mad . . . But you need to be deep, an abyss, a philosopher, to feel this way . . . We are all afraid of the truth. (EH “Clever” 4)

Here, Nietzsche reverses his criticisms of Hamlet as a sickly, weak, life-denying individual. Instead of disparaging Hamlet’s melancholy character, he identifies it as a mark of poignancy, of having a deep insight into the truth of things.

Nietzsche reiterates this interpretation in Nietzsche Contra Wagner, where he identifies Hamlet as an example of a “free, impudent spirit”:

The spiritual arrogance and disgust of anyone who has suffered deeply (order of rank is almost determined by just how deeply people can suffer), the trembling certainty (Gewissheit) that saturates and colours him entirely, a certainty that his sufferings have given him a greater knowledge than the cleverest and wisest can have, that he knows his way around and was once at home in many distant and terrifying worlds that ‘you don’t know anything about!’ . . . this spiritual, silent arrogance of the sufferer, this pride of knowledge’s chosen one, its ‘initiate’, almost its martyr, needs all kinds of disguises to protect itself from the touch of intrusive and pitying hands, and in general from everyone who is not its equal in pain.
Profound suffering makes you noble; it separates.—One of the most refined forms of disguise is Epicureanism, and a certain showy courage of taste that accepts suffering without a second thought and resists everything sad and profound. There are ‘cheerful people’ who use cheerfulness because it lets them be misunderstood: —they want to be misunderstood. There are ‘scientific people’ who use science because it gives a cheerful appearance, and because being scientific implies that a person is superficial: —they want to encourage this false inference . . .There are free, impudent spirits who would like to hide and deny that they are basically shattered, incurable hearts—this is the case with Hamlet: and then even stupidity can be the mask for an ill-fated, all too certain certainty. – (NCW “The Psychologist” 3)

Interestingly, this passage is adapted from Beyond Good and Evil 270, where Nietzsche does not mention Hamlet at all. In Nietzsche Contra Wagner, which is comprised of a selection of passages from Nietzsche’s 1878-1887 published works with small edits, the addition of Hamlet as an example of a free spirit is an alteration worthy of note, indicating that Nietzsche may have changed his mind between 1886 and 1888. Here, Hamlet’s deep suffering is linked to nobility, to being of a high “order of rank.” Hamlet’s status as a sad, “basically shattered, incurable heart” is no longer seen as a problem, but as a virtue. He is elevated to the highest of ranks.

This is a stark difference from his writings of just two years prior. Hamlet moves from being a paradigm of life denial to a paradigm of nobility and poignancy. This change is important for understanding Nietzsche’s account of human greatness. If a figure like Hamlet can undergo such a radical change of status, then it stands to reason that Nietzsche’s thinking about nobility and greatness has also undergone a shift. While I do not have an absolute solution to this interpretive problem of why Nietzsche changes his mind so drastically in his final productive years, I do want to make some suggestions
that might explain his change of heart. On my reading, this shift in Nietzsche’s thinking
should be understood in relationship to two interrelated factors. First, in 1888,
Nietzsche’s writing becomes more self-reflective and autobiographical and he begins to
more explicitly associate himself with exemplars of human greatness. During this time,
Nietzsche begins associating himself with Hamlet. Given that in Ecce Homo Nietzsche
views himself as a higher type, “a well-turned-out-person” (EH I: 2), his association of
Hamlet with himself leads one to suspect that Hamlet, too, should be considered an
exemplar of greatness. Second, Nietzsche’s writings of 1888 contain a focus on the
Dionysian that had been lacking in his writings since The Birth of Tragedy. Interestingly,
when Nietzsche begins to self-identify with Hamlet, he also begins to self-identify with
Dionysus. I will say more about each of these in turn.

Ecce Homo is Nietzsche’s attempt at an autobiography. Therefore, it makes sense
that Nietzsche would begin to think carefully about who he might consider as kindred
spirits in this type of text. It is clear that Nietzsche comes to see Hamlet as this type of
kindred spirit. This is evident when Nietzsche states: “Whenever I glance through my
Zarathustra, I walk around the room for half an hour, sobbing uncontrollably.—
Shakespeare is the most poignant reading I know: how much suffering does it take for
somebody to need to play the clown! —Have people understood Hamlet?” (EH “Clever”
4). Nietzsche relates his own reaction to reading Zarathustra to Hamlet’s clown-like
behavior throughout the play—in each case, the individual is reacting to a deep certainty
about suffering. Nietzsche’s association of Hamlet with himself is further demonstrated
in his question about Hamlet, “how much suffering does it take for somebody to need to
play the clown (*Hanswurst*)!”}, which is echoed in a similar statement about himself:

“Perhaps I am a buffoon (*Hanswurst*)” (EH “Destiny” 1). Further, Nietzsche’s question “Have people understood Hamlet?” is a version of a refrain that reverberates throughout *Ecce Homo*: “Have I been understood?” (see EH “Destiny” 3, 7, 8, 9).23

The changes in Nietzsche’s views on Hamlet can also be interpreted in light of Nietzsche’s self-identification with Dionysus, which intensifies in *Ecce Homo*. In its preface, Nietzsche claims “I am a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus; I would rather be a satyr than a saint” (EH “Preface” 2). The very last line of *Ecce Homo* ties the question of Nietzsche/Hamlet being understood directly to Dionysus: “Have I been understood?—Dionysus versus the crucified” (EH “Destiny” 9). In his notebooks, Nietzsche elaborates on the difference between Dionysus and the crucified:

Dionysus versus the ‘Crucified’: there you have the antithesis. It is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it… The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction. (WP 1052)

For Nietzsche, the Dionysian and Christian views of life are unified in their suffering. Where they differ is in their approach to this suffering. While the Christian condemns suffering and endures it only as a means to an end, to get to heaven, the Dionysian embraces suffering as a natural part of human existence. In *Ecce Homo*, the Dionysian is a symbol for life affirmation, of a healthy individual who is capable of affirming human life, suffering and all: “Saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems; the

---

23 This is noted in Large, “Nietzsche’s Shakespearean Figures,” in *Why Nietzsche Still?*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 58.
will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the sacrifice of its highest types—
that is what I called Dionysian” (EH “The Birth of Tragedy” 3).

This embracing of suffering is exactly what Nietzsche comes to praise about
Hamlet in his works of 1888. Hamlet is an example of an individual whose deep suffering
results in a certainty and “a greater knowledge than the cleverest and wisest can have.”
Hamlet’s plight may make him suffer, but it also gives him a certainty available to only a
select few, those who are “deep, an abyss, a philosopher.” It might seem that Nietzsche is
being critical of Hamlet for using stupidity as a mask for his “ill-fated, all too certain
certainty,” for being anti-Dionysian in his attempt to escape from suffering. But this is
not the case. For Nietzsche, Hamlet is not using the guise of stupidity to avoid the
experience of suffering. Instead, his stupidity is a mask to deter others who can never
have the same depth of insight, who cannot connect to his greater knowledge.24

---

24 This has implications for Nietzsche’s reading of Hamlet. On Nietzsche’s reading, Hamlet’s clownish
behavior should not be taken as a sign of madness, as is sometimes argued. In Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet toys
with Polonius, hiding behind the mask of his clownish behavior:

Polonius: Do you know me, my lord?
Hamlet: Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.
Polonius: Not I, my lord.
Hamlet: Then I would you were so honest a man.
Polonius: Honest, my lord?
Hamlet: Ay, sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked
out of ten thousand.
Polonius: That’s very true, my lord.
Hamlet: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing
carrion—Have you a daughter?
Polonius: I have, my Lord.
Hamlet: Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but, as your
dughter may conceive, friend, look to ‘t.
Polonius [aside]: How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet
he knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger. He is far gone. And truly, in
my youth, I suffered much extremity for love, very near this.
(Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 2. Sc. 2, line 189-208)
With his assertion that Hamlet’s problem is not doubt but certainty, Nietzsche seems to be reverting to a version of his interpretation of *Hamlet* in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he claims: “No, it is not reflection, it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action, both in the case of Hamlet and in that of Dionysiac man” (BT 7). In *The Birth of Tragedy, Ecce Homo*, and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, Nietzsche considers Hamlet a Dionysian man. Yet, in spite of these similarities, there exists a subtle difference between Nietzsche’s early and late understandings of *Hamlet*. The evolution of Nietzsche’s interpretation of *Hamlet* parallels the evolution of his thinking about the Dionysian. While Nietzsche’s discussion of the Dionysian in his late works still, at times, frames it as a “tragic” form of insight, thus retaining his tendency from *The Birth of Tragedy* to discuss it in terms of art, the late Dionysian is not a solely an aesthetic phenomenon. As I argued in Chapter Three, after *The Birth of Tragedy*, one does not require the mediation of the arts to achieve affirmation. Instead, one must be capable of finding life worth living without the aid of art, by being the type of person who has the strength to value life as it is, to love life even with all of its attendant suffering.

Similarly, in 1888, Hamlet is no longer an analogue for the way the audience experiences tragedy, but is an example of life affirmation in modernity. On this reading,

In this example, Hamlet is pretending not to know who Polonius is, or that he is Ophelia’s father. Hamlet’s “stupidity” is a mask for the insults he is hurling at Polonius, who has just conspired with Claudius and Gertrude to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spy on him. Hamlet’s veiled indictment of Polonius’ honesty is interpreted, by Polonius, as madness: “He is far gone.” On a Nietzschean reading, Hamlet uses his foolish behavior as a shield against others, who fail to see the world as he does, with his “basically shattered, incurable heart” and “ill fated, all to certain, certainty” (NCW “The Psychologist” 3).
Hamlet is far from being weak or insane. His actions, his clowning around and feigned stupidity, are a result of his deep insight into the nature of suffering. Having this insight is what makes him Dionysian, what makes him exemplary. Unlike the Hamlet of *The Birth of Tragedy*, who affirms life only as an artist, the Hamlet of Nietzsche’s 1888 works is noteworthy because he suffers the most. No longer trying to understand the play through the categories of ancient Greek tragedy, Nietzsche evaluates *Hamlet* as an individual living in the wake of Christian morality, for whom the life-affirming mythical apparatus of tragedy is no longer a viable option. Within this context, it makes little sense to see Hamlet’s redemptive moment as an artist, as a dramaturge in the play-within-a-play. Instead, Hamlet is redeemed by the very thing that would seem to condemn him in the first place: his deep insight into suffering. This deep insight, which we might imagine comes to him in the form of the ghost of his dead father who informs him of the homicidal actions of his uncle, is what prohibits Hamlet from acting because it disrupts his framework of meaning.25 Young Hamlet’s knowledge of the murder of his father by his own brother and the re-marrying of his mother to her widow’s assassin threatens his ability to make sense of the world. His world has been turned upside-down, “time is out of joint,” and Hamlet sees no reason to act normally, or at all. He sees no need to continue pursuing Ophelia, to avenge his father’s death, to be like Fortinbras. Hamlet’s redemptive, life affirming moment, then, is the very realization that life lacks inherent meaning, that action is futile, that suffering is necessary. This is the insight that allows

him access to greatness, which elevates him to the status of Dionysus. His refusal to sink back into the normal flow of life is a sign of strength, one that forces him to reevaluate his world and to look for meaning in new places. For the Nietzsche of 1888, suffering and wisdom go hand in hand: “one pays the price for being the most profound spirit of all millennia,—one gets rewarded as well” (NCW “Epilogue” 2).

Nietzsche’s association of Hamlet with a “trembling certainty” brought forth through intense suffering—along with Nietzsche’s self-identification with Hamlet and Dionysus—in his writings of the fall of 1888 indicates a move away from his interpretation in the Gay Science and Beyond Good and Evil—and from his initial reading in The Birth of Tragedy. Hamlet is revalued from a meek, misanthropic, melancholic figure to a figure with the greatest form of insight. Hamlet, like Nietzsche himself, is different from a Brutus or a Caesar. He is not a man of great political action, but a man of great suffering. While Nietzsche’s notion of human greatness is unwieldy and difficult to pin down, this change of thinking about Hamlet indicates a shift in his conception of human greatness in general. It does not prevent Brutus and Caesar from being included as exemplars of human greatness, but it does expand Nietzsche’s notion of greatness to include figures like Hamlet, Dionysus, and Nietzsche himself: figures who would otherwise seem insignificant in comparison with the mighty Caesars of the world.

V. Conclusion

Nietzsche’s interpretation of Hamlet can be seen as a litmus test for his thinking about life affirmation and art throughout his career. Hamlet remains an important figure
for Nietzsche from his very first book to his very last. He begins his career by assigning a very important value to Hamlet: he is a Dionysian man. While Nietzsche’s estimation of Hamlet changes over his career, altering him from an individual with immense insight to a weak and melancholic figure, his last words reinstate Hamlet to his formerly glorious position. In the end, Hamlet is not discounted. Instead, Nietzsche holds him up as an enviable figure whose deep awareness of suffering is what makes him great. This has implications for Nietzsche’s theory of life affirmation. For Nietzsche, one important characteristic of great individuals is their ability to affirm life. Thus, Hamlet’s status as an exemplary, Dionysian individual (in Nietzsche’s 1888 writings) is an indication of his status as a life-affirming figure.
CONCLUSION

Nietzsche begins his career with a study of ancient Greek culture, art, and religion. In doing so, he looks at a people whose art allowed them to respond to a fundamental existential question: what, in the face of the cruelty and contingency of existence, can make life worth living? In his early writings, art and life affirmation are explicitly linked. Tragedy, the existence of which marks the apex of ancient Greek civilization, is a form of art that is especially successful at countering the existential quandaries of the Greeks. On Nietzsche’s account, tragedy, above all other arts, is what allowed the ancient Greeks to affirm life. However, after The Birth of Tragedy, the connection between tragedy and affirmation fades. Life affirmation, for the mature Nietzsche, is no longer moderated through tragedy, but takes on a more direct confrontation with suffering. One of the major goals of this dissertation is to show that the link between life affirmation and art does not disappear completely in Nietzsche’s mature writings. Instead, Nietzsche’s theory of art and life affirmation is modified.

In this dissertation, I propose a new way of thinking about the relationship between art and affirmation in Nietzsche’s late work. This new approach looks back to Nietzsche’s early methodology in The Birth of Tragedy, of closely examining a particular form of art, and applies it to Nietzsche’s mature thought. In doing so, I turn to the tragedies of Shakespeare as a paradigmatic example. Shakespeare, as we have seen, plays an interesting role in Nietzsche’s thinking on tragedy. In the formation of The Birth of Tragedy, Shakespeare was clearly on Nietzsche’s mind. That Nietzsche did not ultimately choose to include Shakespeare in his first book is not reason enough, on my reading, to
ignore his importance for Nietzsche’s thinking on tragedy. I have argued that Nietzsche’s writings on Shakespeare open up the possibility for reconstructing a modern theory of tragedy, one that transcends Nietzsche’s (somewhat limited) thinking about ancient Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It opens up the possibility for a Nietzschean theory of modern tragedy, which has implications for his views on the relationship between art and life affirmation in modernity.

On Nietzsche’s account, Shakespeare’s tragedies are affirming because they showcase characters that challenge Christian-morality, which, he argues, is necessarily opposed to a truly life-affirming stance. Shakespeare, as an individual, is capable of creating these anti-moral characters because he, too, stands in opposition to Christian-morality. He is a rare modern individual who has managed to evade the thinking of the herd. Shakespeare, then, is instructive for understanding Nietzsche’s mature theory of life affirmation on several accounts. Not only is he, as an individual, an example of human greatness, but he is also an example of an artist who is capable of creating artworks that contain characters who, too, exemplify human greatness. For these reasons, Shakespeare is an important Nietzschean figure who is helpful for understanding the relationship between art and life affirmation after the demise of ancient Greek tragedy.

I would like to conclude by considering some avenues for further research. First, while this dissertation discusses the possibility of modern tragedy to promote a spirit of life affirmation, it does not develop a full account of life affirmation as it appears in Nietzsche’s mature works. In his later works, an individual must affirm not just the beautiful or pleasant aspects of life, but also life’s pain and suffering. Nietzsche’s concept
of *amor fati* (or love of fate) asks an individual to affirm their entire life, good and bad. Many scholars have argued about the nature of this affirmation, as it is unclear to what extent Nietzsche thinks we must value suffering. Some argue that suffering is affirmable only as a means to an end, because it is a precondition for creativity in art, heroism, knowledge, and human flourishing. Other accounts reject this view, seeing it as valuing suffering only as a means to some other end.¹ They argue that suffering must be affirmed in itself, not because of what it can help an individual achieve. In my future research, I hope to address these concerns by analyzing the role that artistic creativity plays in Nietzsche’s account of life affirmation. I want to suggest that the relationship between suffering and the types of life affirming artistic creativity that Nietzsche admires need not be seen in the terms of a means-end relationship.

Second, my dissertation work invites further investigation into the relationship between Nietzsche’s theory of drives and human greatness. I want to suggest that we can better understand the enigmatic relations between drives in the highest man by expanding our definition of Nietzschean drives beyond a subjective and individualistic model. Recent interpretations of drives in the Anglophone literature, led by Katsafanas’ view, focus on drives as they exist in the agent.² However, this overlooks Nietzsche’s characterization of drives in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is true that in Nietzsche’s later

---


² Richardson is an exception. See Richardson, *Nietzsche’s System*, 20.
writings he predominantly discusses how drives operate within the individual. However, what these popular interpretations overlook is Nietzsche’s use of drives (Treib, Instinkt) in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Here, Nietzsche does not describe the Apolline and Dionysian in subjective, individualistic terms, but as “artistic powers which erupt from nature itself, without the mediation of any human artists, and in which nature’s artistic drives attain their first, immediate satisfaction” (BT 2). The recent commentary on Nietzsche’s theory of drives overlooks its aesthetic origins. Neglecting Nietzsche’s early theory of Apollonian and Dionysian drives limits the scope of its relevance. I hope to argue that understanding Nietzsche’s theory of drives in this way—as containing a fundamental shift from drives as aesthetic and supra-individual to drives that operate within the individual—can help to illuminate the way that they come to be united in the highest man. In other words, Nietzsche’s early thinking on drives is instructive for understanding Nietzsche’s mature drive theory. I want to suggest that the unity of the Apolline and Dionysian drives in tragedy is a helpful analogy for understanding how the multifarious drives of a great individual (like Shakespeare) can be unified into a whole.

---

3 See, for example, BGE 6, where Nietzsche describes drives as constituting the psychology of the individual. In D 119, Nietzsche describes an individual as “the totality of drives which constitute his being.” See also, GS 7.
Primary Literature
References to Nietzsche’s works are cited in text by abbreviation and follow the standard English-language acronym. In references to Nietzsche’s works, Roman numerals generally denote a standard subdivision within a single work. Arabic numerals denote the relevant section number. I cite fragments from the posthumous notes in accordance to their classification in the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA): for example, KSA 14 [453].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>The Anti-Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BGE</td>
<td>Beyond Good and Evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>The Birth of Tragedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Daybreak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EH</td>
<td>Ecce Homo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>On the Genealogy of Morals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS</td>
<td>The Gay Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HH</td>
<td>Human, All Too Human (volumes I and II)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCW</td>
<td>Nietzsche Contra Wagner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI</td>
<td>The Twilight of the Idols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UM</td>
<td>Untimely Meditations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WP</td>
<td>The Will to Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEN</td>
<td>Writings from the Early Notebooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KSA  Reference edition of Nietzsche’s works

I cite the following translations of Nietzsche’s works:


Secondary Literature


174


